

1999

Door to Door

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DOOR TO DOOR

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BY

Bryan Levek

1968-

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

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ABSTRACT

My creative thesis consists of four short stories and my author's introduction to them.

In my introduction, I discuss my primary literary influences; not only the author's whose approaches to short fiction that I share, but also those I feel indifferent towards. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* is admirable for its sketches of common people and ordinary life events. James Joyce is highlighted as the originator of literary epiphany, a moment of revelation or profound insight, and both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Dubliners* provide examples of the device. Hemingway's stripped down language is appreciated for the reader oriented effect it produces. J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories* displays emotionally fragile yet thoroughly amusing male characters, and also employs epiphany. Anton Chekhov's short stories provide many appealing qualities: compassion, humor, a sense of duty to mankind; and they very often address love. The author cited as having the greatest effect on my work is Raymond Carver. Unlike Joyce and Salinger, Carver's stories carry epiphanies that are experienced by the readers; the stories are full of simple people and ordinary life events; the language is so spare it begs reader interaction; and Carver often relies upon poetic images.

Through research, I have gained a better understanding of my approach to short fiction. "Door to Door," "The Christmas Card," "The Burn," and "Quick

Change," in one way or another, demonstrate this approach: stories committed to the art of the everyday, told in spare and unassuming language, touched with humor, enriched by poetic images, often focusing on love and heartbreak, and sometimes ending in epiphany.

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I wish to thank my family, their faith, humor, wisdom, love, and affection has kept me strong. In particular, I'd like to thank my father; besides pressing the important balance of mind, body, and spirit, he tells a heck of a good hunting story about a giant grizzly bear. My mother deserves applause for backing the theatric efforts of my younger years, and a standing ovation for inspiring comedy and drama in my writing. Marlyn, thanks for your sunshine. I admire your positive outlook on life, your smile. I'm not sure my mouth bends that far...but thanks. Sue and Lew Hankenson, thanks for your warmth, kindness...and the use of your cable television. I'd like to thank my siblings, Amy, Rhett, Ryan, and Nathan; as your big brother, I'd like to commend you for

all the laughter, tears, and punishment. The years are catching up, let's carry on like Eric Clapton – let us “Keep On Growing.”

In addition, I must thank my friends, Chris, Cassi, Joe, John, and Walt – you guys believed.

Most of all, I wish to thank Karen. Let's get this straight, it is you who saved *my* life. Sweet dreams, dear.

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INTRODUCTION

Last May an old friend called, the kind who makes the eyes glow and the heart flutter. I couldn't have thought up a better story than the one she passed along. Her story – she claims it is all true – was the catalyst for getting this project, dragging on for many years as it has been, finally finished.

The first thing she said was, “Thanks.” Naturally, not having spoken to her for two years, I replied, “For what?”

She had suffered a recurring nightmare. She is speeding down an empty highway with her young boy in the back seat. The world around her resembles the open fields of Africa: no people, no buildings, just tall brush, trees, and a few wild animals. Everything is smooth, she says. A Sunday drive, only it's Africa. But then a pack of hyenas crowds the road before her. They tilt their heads, they flash their teeth, and they laugh at her. She is petrified behind the wheel. She honks her horn, but the beasts won't budge. Frantic, she checks on her boy in the back seat. He's fine. He loves this. He points and says, “Doggy” over and over. In tears, she puts her hands back on the wheel. She closes her eyes and prays for the hyenas to vanish. When she opens them, the hyenas are still roaming about and laughing. But something else, another hand joins the wheel, one much rougher and larger: mine. I appear on the passenger side and guide her around the beasts to safe passage. I saved her life, she says.

We reminisced a little after that, but what I remember the most is the scolding. “You’re wasting time,” she said, “I know it.” She trashed all my excuses: a full time job, a part time job, the necessity of a social life and experience, writer’s block. Like a mother she added, “Finish what you started.” I promised I would, but that wasn’t enough. Before I hung up the phone she made me recite the children’s rhyme, “Cross my heart and hope to die...”

Who knows what influences the writer? What makes the words come, the characters move, the ending arrive on time? The writer himself is the first person who should answer, but often he is the last. What I know for certain is that this conversation stayed with me, hyenas and all, and got this stalled, nearly expired project back on track. Since that phone call I have been hard at work on stories that had lain around as drafts – or as mere ideas – for years, and have managed to bring four of them to something that feels at last like completion.

I know, too, that my own work, like that of all writers, arises from a complex interaction of personal and literary experience. The subjects usually come from my own life, while literary influence supplies the means of expressing the experience. But perhaps my real point, in this exploration of my own sources, is that literary experience *is* personal.

Academic reading laid the groundwork for my love of modernist authors. Favorites include Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, and Tim O’Brien’s short story collection *The Things They Carried*.

Outside reading reinforced this love, with particular emphasis on the short story. For example, John Updike's "A&P" was so enjoyable I purchased a copy of the collection *Pigeon Feathers*. J.D. Salinger's *A Catcher in the Rye* led me to *Nine Stories*. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* inspired me to read the short story collection *Welcome to the Monkey House*. And although I found F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* rather depressing, I made it a point to read *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, published in 1989, edited and with a preface by critic and biographer Matthew J. Bruccoli.

Other times, literary influence arose from circumstance. I saw the very first NC-17 movie, *Henry and June* (the story of Henry Miller and Anais Nin) and picked up Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. The book was an ode to artistic freedom: "I am going to sing for you, a little off key perhaps, but I will sing" (Miller 2). The breakup of a lengthy relationship left me severely depressed; my cousin introduced me to Raymond Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. Carver's stories were full of damaged people, but they were trying. I needed that. Learning of the influence of Anton Chekhov on Carver, I picked up *The Portable Chekhov*. Both authors presented likable territory, a sense of community, an affection for the lower/middle class, and a desire to understand love and relationships.

The stories of Sherwood Anderson, with their deep concern for humanity, have greatly affected my work. In *Winesburg, Ohio* we are given the idea of community and various sketches of the inhabitants, a place, a time, the people.

Anderson's stories rely heavily on the faithful representation of the lives he felt bound to. In a lecture entitled "A Writer's Conception of Realism," Anderson explains such representation as a mysterious literary duty:

If I have been working intensely, I find myself unable to relax when I go to bed. Often I fall into a half-dream state and when I do, the faces of people begin to appear before me. They snap into place before my eyes, stay there, sometimes for a short period, sometimes longer. There are smiling faces, leering ugly faces, tired faces, hopeful faces...I have the feeling that the faces that appear before me thus at night are those people who want their stories told and whom I have neglected. (5)

Anderson's faith in fiction inspired and shaped by experience falls under the authorial code *write what you know*, and I feel most comfortable working in this tradition. The figures in my short stories hail, accordingly, from Central Illinois and are based upon family, friends, lovers, and strangers. These people are a constant inspiration, and like Anderson's sketches in *Winesburg, Ohio*, which render what critic Malcom Cowley calls, in an introduction to the 1960 Viking Press edition, "that single moment of aliveness," my stories seek to elevate shared moments from memory (7). They are like snapshots one cannot find in any family album. They are moments unseen, often pictures of things taken for granted.

Whereas Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* centers around the lives of small town Midwesterners, James Joyce's *Dubliners* is a thought-provoking short story collection set in early 1900s middle-class Catholic Dublin. Joyce goes beyond a sense of community and describes a maturing process. Simply put, the protagonist of the first story is a boy, and by the last story, "The Dead," he has grown up. This maturation process inspired me to take on the difficult task of capturing the adolescent voice of Emily Dosek in "Door to Door."

The primary influence of James Joyce resides in the device of the *epiphany*, defined in modern literary terms as "a moment of revelation or profound insight" (Morner and Rausch 68). Joyce first discussed the term in his novel *Stephen Hero*, which was rewritten and then published in 1916 as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The closing passages of the novel are journal entries by Stephen Dedalus and culminate in literary epiphany:

26 April: Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

27 April: Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead. (252-253)

Joyce's use of epiphany in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* would inspire other novelists as well. For example, at the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator offers the revelation, "tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther" (189).

For a short story writer, the more influential work by Joyce is *Dubliners*, a collection of stories that also employ the use of epiphany. The earlier stories, "The Sisters" (where the young boy attends the visitation of a dead priest) and "Araby" (an adolescent love story which ends suddenly at a bazaar), are prime examples of epiphany. There is just enough in the closing passages of each story to suggest that our first-person narrator has reached a moment of resolve, an awareness. In a review written in 1914, Ezra Pound favors Joyce's approach:

He is not bound by the tiresome convention that any part of life, to be interesting, must be shaped into the conventional form of a "story." Life for the most part does not happen in neat little diagrams and nothing is more tiresome than the continual pretence that it does. (267)

The device of the epiphany is common in realistic fiction since it resists the classical order of conflict, resolution, and denouement in order to create a sense of direct experience and fresh perception. In my own work, "The Burn" provides a good example of epiphany. The story concerns two young lovers in a speeding car, embroiled in an argument about the young woman's mother. My goal in

writing the story was to forego the classical mode and capture a moment, to allow the characters themselves – their words, their actions – to tell us something about what it's like to be young and in love. Henry and Kate talk, argue, and tease one another with reckless abandon. Kate winds up burning Henry's hand with a cigarette, and the car nearly ends up in a ditch. The epiphany, the *awareness* reached by the couple is the idea, perhaps naïve, that like the burn scar their love will last forever.

Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* draws from Joyce's *Dubliners* in that the stories often use the device of the epiphany (as in "The End of Something" and "Soldier's Home") and portray the maturation of Hemingway's first hero, Nick Adams. Beyond these highly noticeable features, it is Hemingway's approach to language that has certainly influenced my work. He described it as the desire to "strip the language clean, to lay it bare down to the bone" (Baker 104). This "bare bones" approach is characterized by short, choppy sentences and words that are easily understood by the masses - from the college professor on down to the garbage man. Hemingway resisted heavy handed prose in an effort to display life truthfully, and the reader must often pay fierce attention to unadorned dialogue to draw conclusions. However, as is the case with any writer, Hemingway's style evolved. Phillip Young points out that by the publication of *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, Hemingway's language had grown much richer: "...the prose, still very distinguished, called much less attention to itself. It is less tense, less austere, less behavioristic and impersonal, is more relaxed

and orthodox" (205-206). My adoration of Hemingway's style is rooted in the short stories, the earliest and very unadorned language of Hemingway. I admired the natural flow of dialogue between the sexes; sometimes playful, as in "Cat in the Rain," other times tragic, as in "Hills Like White Elephants." In the Nick Adams stories, told by a third-person narrator, there is very little psychological intervention; the narrator rarely describes Nick's thoughts and feelings. Therefore, as in real life and one-on-one conversation, the reader must imagine what the character thinks and feels. The message, as I see it, is that well-written dialogue can nearly tell a whole story; what's left out the reader must perceive through imagination, and very often from memory. The reader becomes intimately involved in the story. In part, this is the intention of my own story, "The Burn."

While I firmly agree with Hemingway's style, I'm indifferent to the way his idea of manhood carries over into his fiction. As Roger Whitlow states, "There was something pathetic about so talented and sound a writer having continually to pound his barrel chest for all the world to see, to announce to friends and enemies alike what manhood really was" (107). Hemingway served in a war, the ultimate test of bravery and courage. He was obsessed by sport and competition; he loved boxing, bull fights, gambling on horses, and hunting. His curiosity leaned towards violence and death. Hemingway the man and Hemingway the writer converged to give us such notable works as the short

story collections *In Our Time* and *Men Without Women*, and the novels *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*.

Aside from imagination and a practiced hand at manipulating language, every author works from experience, beliefs, and personal ideology. Therefore it is difficult to fault Hemingway for harsh criticism such as that handed down by Pamella Farley:

In no piece of fiction or drama written by Hemingway is there a relationship between a man and a woman which is not degrading, including the idyllic romance genre where the woman is a cardboard slave existing solely to increase the stature of the man. (in Whitlow 11).

However, in dealing with love – a common theme for me as well – Hemingway often celebrates a male character who controls the relationship, who fails to understand the woman's side of things. Although Hemingway's novels, most notably *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, do display interesting, dramatic women, where are the female protagonists in the short fiction? More troubling in Hemingway's short fiction is a tendency towards selfish isolation, the idea that being a man is more important than being in love. In a review of *In Our Time*, D.H. Lawrence describes Hemingway's perspective: "Avoid one thing only: getting connected up. Don't get connected up. If you get held by anything, break it. Don't be held. Break it, and get away" (93). My response to

Hemingway is decidedly opposite. The male protagonists of “The Burn” and “The Christmas Card” want to “get connected up” and stay that way. Therefore the characters exchange words in a comfortable manner; communication is at the heart of understanding.

More appealing to me, in many ways, than Hemingway’s manly heroes were Salinger’s doubt-ridden adolescents and the voice he found in them. *Catcher in the Rye* is an impassioned first-person narrative that has deeply influenced much of contemporary fiction, both long and short form. Holden Caulfield endlessly questions and fights maturity; he is indifferent to the very adult world around him. *Nine Stories* offers more of the same, adult characters seen under the spotlight of the perspectives of alienated adolescents: “For Esme, With Love and Squalor” is a retrospective story in which a preinvasion intelligence trainee, now a married man, expresses his love for a soon-to-be married young lady he met in a café; and “Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes” is a sharp tale in which a single phone call discloses a double romantic betrayal. Salinger’s characters are emotionally fragile, never cocksure, dominant males. Whereas the Hemingway hero exists under a manly, tough guy credo, Salinger’s heroes linger in the gray area of good and evil, nearly always to convey a sense of responsibility and guilt.

Salinger’s short stories often employ the device of the epiphany. Critics Bernice and Sanford Goldstein point out that Salinger promoted Zen ideology in his work, not Christian epiphany. But the results seem to be much the same as in

the epiphany fiction of Anderson and Joyce, “an enlightenment which permits experience that is complete and unadulterated and makes the moment and, in effect, life non-phoney” (160). Perhaps it is not so much literary epiphany as it is the element of surprise. Unlike Anderson’s, Joyce’s, and Hemingway’s, Salinger’s short stories are playful as kids at school recess - some race towards the swings, others love the monkey bars, and a few play hop-sotch. Salinger enjoys the role of Harry Houdini. “A Perfect Day For Bananafish,” shocks with its suicidal ending. “Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes” is a rollercoaster of dialogue that by tale’s end completes the magic trick illusion – both couples are cheating. My own attempt is “The Christmas Card,” a story rich in irony with a surprise ending.

Although I came to the work of Anton Chekhov after the aforementioned authors, he is a far greater influence. Through Chekhov I began to form a similar approach to short fiction. Compassion and humor burn brightly in his stories, and the overwhelming effect is a sense of duty to mankind. Chekhov believed that “Man will become better when you show him what he is like” (27). His characters mostly reflect the lower classes, and the stories are deeply rooted in common human experience. For instance, a nine-year-old shoemaker’s apprentice writes a letter to his grandfather in “Vanka,” and an old sleigh driver grieves the death of his son in “Heartache.” Chekhov is concerned with capturing *moments* – the common, everyday experiences often taken for granted. Thus the stories are hardly rich in plot. Where writers before him chose the

classical format, with introduction, conflict, development, and denouement, Chekhov was satisfied with a fragmentary approach – bits and pieces of life, snapshots. Critic and editor Avrahm Yarmolinsky provides a wonderful description of Chekhov's art:

[Chekhov's stories] ...no more bear retelling than does a poem...with no more progression than there is in a dance. Instead of moving toward a definite conclusion, they are apt to trail off or drop to an anti-climax. And yet they manage to take hold of the imagination in an amazing fashion. Precisely because of the lack of invention and contrivance, the absence of cleverness, the fact that loose ends are not tucked up nor the rough edges beveled, and that they remain unfinished in more senses than one, they have the impact of a direct experience. (23)

One of the most influential aspects of Chekhov's short stories is his tendency to discuss matters of love and marriage. In "About Love" the narrator states,

So far only one incontestable truth has been stated about love: 'This is a great mystery'; everything else that has been written or said about love is not a solution, but only a statement of questions that have remained unanswered. (385)

Chekhov's short fiction often echoes this *statement of questions*, never providing an answer to matters of the heart. Critic Virginia Llewellyn Smith has devoted an entire book to exploring Chekhov's relationship with women and the role they play in his work. From a biographical viewpoint, highlighting Chekhov's own romantic pitfalls, she proposes that "in the world of Chekhov's fiction no happy relationship with the sexes is permitted to exist" (9). I believe it's less important that Chekhov perhaps failed to understand the women in his life, and more important that he *sought* to understand. Love is a common theme in my short stories, and both "The Burn" and "The Christmas Card" attempt to understand the complex fabric of relationships, Chekhov's "great mystery" as it were. However, whereas Chekhov's relationships evade romance and rarely permit physical interaction, I have taken a lighter, more hopeful approach, one that acknowledges the stress and strain of staying together, but also fairly expresses the intense joy gathered from all that work. The protagonists of "The Burn" and "The Christmas Card" take on the task of calming their unsettled hearts, and as is often the case in real life, communication holds the answer.

Perhaps the single greatest influence on my stories is Raymond Carver. It was by accident, long before academia entered the picture, that I was introduced to his work. I was struggling with clinical depression when I first read Raymond Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*; the book was a Christmas gift from my cousin, Mike. I had never read anything so spare and yet so telling. The characters were simple people, and they were as lost, disturbed, and isolated as

I'd become. I latched onto them from page one. Raymond Carver, decent meals, and regular exercise, that became the cure. First of all, Carver's determination to fill his stories with the plight of maladjusted members of lower and middle-class America brought direction and motivation to my short stories. In an interview with critics Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Carver explains this feature of his work: "The things that have made an indelible impression on me are the things I saw in lives I witnessed being lived around me, and in the life I myself lived" (111). Raymond Carver's affirming stories arise from the writer's credo, "Write what you know," the same lesson as in Sherwood Anderson's work, but a lesson so deceptively complex that it needs to be learned again and again. For something to appear true and real it must come from the heart. I know about pushing fast food, bagging up groceries, kneading bread in an Italian restaurant, caring for the mentally handicapped, and fielding telemarketing calls. I know that my neighbor will never learn to play acoustic guitar until he takes lessons. I know that some of the best stories are told in taverns. And as represented in "The Burn," I know what it's like to be speeding down the highway with your first love – amid teasing, laughter, smoke, rock music and occasional groping.

Carver's prose, much like Hemingway's, is unforgettably spare, a quality which reached its pinnacle in the collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Early on, this quality caused many critics to label the author a *minimalist*. Critic James Atlas complained that Carver's stories are "so aggressive

in the suppression of detail, that one is left with a hunger for the richness, texture, excess, just as the cubed glass high-rises of Manhattan frustrate the eye's longing for nuance" (Saltzman 6). In an essay in *Fires* (a collection of essays, poems and short stories) Carver defended his approach:

...I put the furnishings and the physical things surrounding the people into the stories as I need those things. Perhaps this is why it's sometimes been said that my stories are unadorned, stripped down, even 'minimalist'. (30)

The argument against Carver and similar writers such as Donald Barthelme, Ann Beattie, and Tobias Wolff has ceased. Spare, terse, succinct, brief – no matter, it works. What continually fascinates me about Carver's prose is the way that lack of detail – not only physical objects but psychological, character-oriented details – sparks the imagination and forces the reader to find connections within his own past, his own unique memories. The demands are easily met because Carver's fiction is rooted in common, everyday joy and tragedy. His work deals with the universal communication exercised at dinner tables, restaurants, at the office, over coffee, over beers, in front of TVs, and in the bedroom before the light is switched off. To dismiss Carver's work for what it is missing, would be missing the point. He doesn't want to paint us a finely detailed picture of life. He trusts that our palettes are loaded with more than enough color, more than enough memories to finish the job.

In addition, Carver uses literary epiphany in a very different way than aforementioned authors James Joyce and J.D. Salinger – Carver’s epiphanies are experienced by the readers. The characters can never properly articulate a moment of awareness. The most explicit example appears in “One More Thing,” in which L.D., an alcoholic, is forced to leave his wife and fifteen-year-old-daughter:

L.D. put the shaving bag under his arm and picked up the suitcase.

He said, “I just want to say one more thing.”

But then he could not think what it possibly could be.

Quite often Carver’s epiphanies are less a moment of revelation than they are a glimmer of hope. The characters show the courage to carry on, and the reader leaves the story with a sense of warmth, however small. James Packer, the old man in “After the Denim,” knows his wife will soon die of a fatal ailment, and yet at the end of the story he finds solace in his embroidery. In “A Small, Good Thing,” a couple undergoes the tragic loss of their only child on his birthday; by story’s end they are filling up on bread at the bakery where the harassing phone calls originated when the cake was not picked up. Occasionally, Carver’s epiphanies are clouded by his talent as a poet, and thus beg the reader to form conclusions that draw upon earlier images in the story. Consider the closing passage of “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”: “I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone’s heart. I could hear the human noise we

sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark” (185). Apart from the association of *love* and *heart*, Mel McGinnis, the narrator’s friend, is a cardiologist. Although I admire Carver’s epiphanies, I lean towards a use of the device that is more character oriented, as evident in “The Christmas Card” and “Quick Change.” It’s a reflection of my personality: I hate TV shows that end with TO BE CONTINUED, I dislike those that walk away from arguments, and I seek closure at the end of any relationship.

A final touch of influence from the work of Raymond Carver is the thought-provoking interaction between his poetry and his short fiction. Carver’s poetry is constructed from fragments of real lives, and his short fiction often provides moments that can be viewed as containing the elements of poetry. Consider this passage from the story “Where I’m Calling From,” in which the narrator tells us how J.P. (a client at Frank Martin’s drying-out facility) once fell into a dry well:

He’d sat there and looked up at the well mouth. Way up at the top, he could see a circle of blue sky. Every once in a while a white cloud passed over. A flock of birds flew across, and it seemed to J.P. their wingbeats set up this odd commotion. He heard other things. He heard tiny rustlings above him in the well, which made him wonder if things might fall down into his hair. He was thinking of insects. He heard wind blow over the well mouth, and that sound made an impression on him, too. In short, everything

about his life was different for him at the bottom of that well. But
nothing fell on him and nothing closed off that little circle of blue.
(281)

The passage relies upon poetic images, and with the language reworked, is strong enough to have appeared in any Raymond Carver poetry collection. In Carver's short stories, a central, poetic image often begs the reader to form associations that revolve around it. Poetic images that come to mind as examples are the peacock in "Feathers," the slugs in "I Could See The Smallest Things," the drowned, naked girl in "So Much Water So Close to Home," and falling items from a medicine chest in "Vitamins." Carver discusses his use of the poetic image as follows: "They seem to evolve, occur. I truly invent them and *then* certain things seem to form around them as events occur, recollection and imagination begin to color them, and so forth" (106). Revision demands that some images vanish, while others seem to pop up as if from a magician's hat. Although it is questionable to what degree I have succeeded, in "The Burn" I attempt to employ such a central poetic image: the circular burn scar that draws association to the sun, the cherry-red glow of a cigarette, and the unforgettable, circular infinity of first love.

I am a great fan of film noir, the classic black and white detective film. My favorites are *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*. The research involved in this essay has been a literary search for clues, a quest to identify the figures that shape my short fiction. The following stories are prime examples of how the key

literary influences (Anderson, Joyce, Hemingway, Salinger, Chekhov and Carver) have fostered my work. "Door to Door," "The Christmas Card," "The Burn," and "Quick Change," in one way or another, demonstrate my approach to short fiction: stories committed to the art of the everyday, told in spare and unassuming language, touched with humor, enriched by poetic images, often focusing on love and heartbreak, and sometimes ending in epiphany.

Like everyone, I have neighbors. One early morning, say two or three, I was awakened by determined knocking in the apartment upstairs. The girl upstairs refused to answer, and I gathered that her live-in boyfriend had done something wrong. He knocks some more and then begins, in his best rendition of The Temptations or The Four Tops, to try to make her open the door. At first she mocks his efforts. But when the apology stretches far beyond sincerity, to the point when any one of us might call the police, she relents and opens the door. Perhaps one day, with much imagination, I'll tell their story. I hope the reader pays attention, because nearly everyone can listen, while so few try to *understand*.

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Door to Door

I stand in front of the long mirror in the hallway and I lean forward. I'd like to pop this real fat zit that the Sandman brought, but Mom is in her bedroom arguing with Dad. If she sees me so much as touch my face, I'm a goner. I'll be the one she's yelling at.

"You promised, Ray!" I hear Mom shout from the crack in the door.

"What about the kids, Lorraine?" says Dad.

"Baseball, baseball!" shouts Mom. She slams the dresser shut. "You and your little league crusade. Just because you never got to play for the Cardinals you have to foster the next Ozzie Smith. Meanwhile, the paint cracks and cracks."

"I'll get to the house," says Dad. "I've got the whole summer."

My father teaches Advanced Biology at Normal Community. My mother teaches kindergarten at Oakdale Elementary. I usually side with Dad because Mom doesn't calmly debate an issue – she throws a tantrum like a child.

I step back and look at myself. I pull at my hair until it lays right. My hair is OK, I guess, but I wonder when it will get dark like Mom's. I will not be a blonde! I don't mind getting taller but my thighs are getting plump. These blue jean shorts don't fit anymore. Even my favorite green T-shirt seems tight. I stand in profile and I want to scream. My breasts are coming!

The door opens. My hands fall to my sides.

"Looking good," says Dad from over my shoulder. I have his big brown eyes, the small round nose, and the very same dimple in my chin. As he shuttles down the hall he adds, "Have a good day, Emily."

I stick out my chest and I want to barf.

Mom walks out of the bedroom and stands behind me. She stands there in her white bikini and breathes down my neck. Her hands are on her hips, like they always are when she's pissed off. My skin looks pale compared to hers. Mom's a slave to the sun.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Mom, I think I need a new bra," I say into the mirror.

"Well don't frown about it, Emily," she says.

She turns me around, "Look at me," she says.

I look at the way her big breasts hang in her top and I know I'm doomed to someday look the same way.

"Look at me, Emily," she demands and lifts my chin.

"What?" I say. Today her eyes are blue. Other days they are green.

"This could be the summer you change, Emily," she says. She speaks like a woman from the movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, an alien clone. Dad let me stay up late to watch it on American Movie Classics.

Frightened, I back into the mirror.

"I changed, your grandma changed. It's natural." Mom speaks like out of this world. She takes a step forward and says, "Emily, it's OK to be scared." She holds out her spidery arms and smiles. "How about a hug?" she begs.

I dart into my bedroom and close the door; I push the button that locks it. I step away and wait to see what she'll do. I concentrate on birds chirping outside my window and try to separate the cardinals from the robins and swallows.

Mom knocks three times then asks, "Emily, what are you doing in there?"

I open the dresser drawer, "Changing my shorts," I say.

She turns the knob and knocks again. "Let's talk, Emily," she says.

I step closer to the door and I say, "I'm fine, Mom. I'm just putting something else on. These shorts don't fit."

Everything gets quiet and I finally hear the song of the cardinal. I go to the dresser and pull out a brand new pair of white Guess shorts. I slip one leg through but then I take them off. I toss them to the floor. If Mom is right, then I shouldn't wear white that often. I sit on the bed and collapse on my back.

I remember Mary Lemley. It was the last week of school. The lunch room was packed because it was Tuesday, taco day. Mary left the table to dump her tray, and when she turned to come back she noticed finger pointing and laughter. She spun around and reached for a supposed note on her back - there was none. The laughter continued, the news spread in ear-tickling whispers, and a few boys even tossed crumpled up napkins at Mary's feet. Finally, Mrs. Hopkins, the 5th grade teacher on lunch room duty, came to the rescue. I remember standing at the trash can as Mrs. Hopkins walked Mary to the bathroom. I saw the red splotch on Mary's white shorts and I looked away. I froze over the trash can until Miles Munson, a boy with horn rimmed glasses who had a crush on me since the third grade, emptied my tray for me.

I suppose a pair of blue jeans will do, I tell myself. I dress.

I gaze into the twenty-gallon aquarium on top of the dresser and click on the light. I lift the lid and say, "Good morning, Kermit." His body sways on the driftwood and he greets me with his beady eyes. I hear a cricket chirp and deduce that it must be hiding in the darkened corner behind the potted jade plant. Kermit is not a frog, he is a praying mantis. My father used to read me this children's book called "Being Green," a book about being different and happy. Kermit (from *Sesame Street*) was the narrator. I've never had a dog or

cat, not even a hamster; animal hair gives me an itchy rash and makes my eyes water.

“Kermit, we’ve got to get going,” I say. He doesn’t appreciate the force of my breath and so he strolls forward on his claw-like front limbs. “I know you probably hate to see me sell your brothers and sisters door to door” – 25 egg cases from a biological supply company in North Carolina – “but think of all the good your kind can do for this neighborhood. Rid our gardens of aphids, grasshoppers and leaf munching worms. Cut down the population of flies, mosquitoes and moths. This neighborhood and then the world!” I exclaim.

I reach into the tank and capture Kermit. With his long front limbs he hangs onto the jade plant, but I gently pull him free. Then I transfer him to a Kaper’s shoebox and carefully punch a good many air holes in the lid with a pencil. Once downstairs, I grab a can of Coca-Cola from the refrigerator and the 25 praying mantis egg cases from the vegetable crisper. They have to stay cold to simulate winter and keep from hatching. I find a few rotten tomatoes and I toss them in the garbage beneath the sink.

Before I leave the house for the day, I step out to the back deck to say goodbye to Mom. She is sunbathing as usual, flat on her back on a crimson bath towel. Beads of sweat cover her dark body -- kind of like morning dew on the grass, I think.

“Mom,” I say and pull up a blue wicker chair from the matching round table.

“Go ahead, Emily. Don’t block my sun,” she says.

“I’m sorry,” I say like I mean it. Really I don’t want to screw up my allowance.

Mom gets up on her elbows and lowers her Ray-Ban sunglasses to look at me. "Don't sweat it," she jokes. "Here," she says and hands me an old Windex bottle she's filled with water, "spray me, I'm hot."

I start at her feet.

"Emily, it's like when you had that caterpillar," she says.

"The Monarch caterpillar," I say as I look back on it.

"And one day you removed that Miracle Whip lid..."

I spray her stomach.

"...and the caterpillar was gone."

"The chrysalis hung from the lid," I say.

"And you pouted."

"Because it was boring, all that waiting," I say.

I look off to the side and spray her breasts.

"But the ugly caterpillar finally changed into a beautiful butterfly."

"Mom," I say in a tone of distress, "it flew away the minute I opened the lid."

She takes the water out of my hands, removes her sunglasses, and lies flat on her back. She closes her eyes. "I swear, Emily," she says, "I can't teach you a thing."

"Mom, I know the life cycle of the butterfly," I say.

"That wasn't my point," she says.

"Then what is it?" I ask.

Mom sighs horribly, then finally confesses, "Your *menstrual* cycle, Emily. I was talking about your period."

So I walk up to Mr. Anderson's door and I knock three times, very polite. It takes him a while because he's pretty old and fat, but eventually he answers.

He stands there with no shirt on and I get a little grossed out. He's hairy and his belly hangs over his navy blue shorts. He has a mean sunburn too. Mr. Anderson works the nightshift at the Mitsubishi plant. He has a garden but it needs work. Sometimes I see him through the missing board in our back fence. He spends a lot of time sitting in his lawn chair looking at magazines. He must have fallen asleep to get so red.

I tell him who I am, Emily Doosek, "Doosek" which sounds like "music". He nods and says he remembers me; he opens the screen door and steps out onto the porch in his bare, white feet. I notice his toenails need trimming. I'm very observant. "Like a scientist," Dad always says. Mr. Anderson smiles – his teeth are ugly and yellow. Could be coffee stains. Or is it from cigarettes? Perhaps cigars. He crosses his arms and I notice they are big as the arms of the wrestlers on TV. But wrestling is fake and so I never watch it. I prefer National Geographic on PBS.

I go right into my speech, the one I wrote five times. Not enough books are written about the mighty insect world and so the task was difficult. Encyclopedias are OK, but they only scratch the surface.

Mr. Anderson makes a funny face, like maybe his stomach hurts, and asks again what this is all about. I need to slow down, I speak too fast, just like my mother.

So I start over: "Mr. Anderson, the praying mantis, though really very odd looking, is a graceful creature that does away with many, many back yard pests. They eat flies and mosquitoes, leaf munching moth larvae, and

grasshoppers. Now Mr. Anderson, I know that you have an apple tree and a garden.”

“Well, my wife used to take care of them.”

“Where is your wife?” I ask.

Mr. Anderson clears his throat then says, “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Well,” I start up even though his face has gone all sad, “notice Kermit’s claw-like front *appendages*. He catches food with those.”

“Hmmm.”

“Now as the praying mantis grows it develops wings. They can’t fly fast as bees but the wings help them to escape predators and move from place to place. See, the mantis is patient as a spider.”

“I hate spiders,” mumbles Mr. Anderson.

“The praying mantis will land on a plant, in a tree, on the side of a wall, even near a shining porch light crowded with moths and wait for an unassuming victim.”

I put the shoebox at my feet and then show him one of the praying mantis eggs. “These are mantis eggs,” I announce. “Hundreds of baby mantii will hatch out of this egg case when the weather gets warm enough. Hundreds, Mr. Anderson.”

He takes the bark colored frothy mass from my fingers and inspects it. His mouth drops. “I can’t see them in there,” he says, like he doesn’t believe me. “Looks like caulk on a stick,” he adds.

“They are protected in that egg shell...Like when before you were born nobody could see you,” I explain.

“Oh,” he says and hands the egg case back to me.

Just then, Tanya, who is much older than me, walks out the door and joins us. She nearly steps on Kermit. Tanya has long blonde hair that doesn’t

move in the breeze. Gobs of hairspray, I suspect. She has nice blue eyes but it's hard to see them under all the silvery eyeshadow and black mascara. Her lips are caked in plum colored lipstick. Today she wears a loose fitting pink halter top (cleavage galore) and blue jean cut-offs. "Hey," she says as she adjusts her top, "What you got there?"

I show her the mantis eggs. On purpose I push it under her nose.

"Ooo!" she cries and makes a face like after a spoonful of cough syrup. "What are you doing with moth balls?" she asks.

"These are praying mantis eggs," I correct her, "and this is Kermit." I take off the lid on the shoebox and Tanya looks inside.

"Careful with your hair," I say. I bet she'd freak if Kermit decided to climb on up and say hello.

Tanya pulls her hair back and says, "It looks like a twig."

"Camouflage," I say. I put the lid on and turn to Mr. Anderson: "What do you say, sir?" I ask.

"How much?" he says.

"A dollar an egg."

He fingers his graying mustache and sighs. Then he brings out his wallet. "I'll take three," he says and pulls out a five-dollar bill.

Tanya swipes the bill from his hand and slips it into her hip pocket.

"Tanya, what are you doing?" asks Mr. Anderson.

From the top of the street comes a thunderous sound.

"I'm going for a ride, daddy."

A big black car pulls up to the curb. On the hood is a fiery orange eagle.

"And where are you going, Tanya."

The engine stops but distorted heavy metal ruins the silence.

"Umm, I think Tommy said we're having a picnic."

Tanya hears her name and turns. She holds up a finger.

“Cute, Tanya... Buy your cigarettes, whatever else.”

“Dad, this is gas money.”

“Whatever – just be home for dinner.”

Tanya nods in agreement and jogs through the thick grass. The boy in the car starts up the engine. Tanya hops in, smiles, and waves at us. The boy tears off down the street like he’s trying to say something. A trail of black smoke vanishes slowly.

Mr. Anderson shakes his head. “Let’s try this again,” he says. He finds another five-dollar bill and hands it to me.

I return him two dollars. “And here are the eggs and your directions,” I say with a smile. Mr. Anderson doesn’t return the smile, he doesn’t even thank me. He steps inside and I shout through the screen door, “The grass has grown high. If you want, I can take care of it.”

He doesn’t come back. I hear his answer from somewhere in the kitchen. “No, no,” he says. A moment later he adds, “Everything grows too fast, everything.”

I come in the front door and the first thing I feel is the air conditioner, so cold it has to be full blast. I set my things by the staircase and rest my hand on the banister.

“Not exactly the girl scouts, but how did you do?” asks my mother. She sits in the high-backed crimson colored chair, the legs are wooden and curved. She still has on the white bikini. Her legs are crossed. The TV is on. The TV tray is out. She’s watching her favorite soap opera, *The Rich and Spoiled*. Dad says that soaps give women bad ideas.

“Seven dollars,” I tell her.

"Come here and sit down," she says.

I walk to the matching chair and the TV says, "Rush Cola, when you absolutely, positively have to pay attention."

"You going to the movies, Mom?" I ask and lean my head back.

"No, the dandelions are getting bad," she says. She hunches forward and swipes a french fry through the catsup.

"You gotta get the roots," I say.

"Quiet," she says. She chews on the french fry and the show continues.

A man with curly black hair and round glasses says, "I don't think you understand. Victor is a powerful man."

The woman shoves the man. She gets close and grabs his red tie. "I'll take him for all he's got," she says. She yanks him to her face. "I'll suck him dry," she says. They kiss for a very long time.

"Mom?"

"Huh---Oh shit!," she cries. A catsup soaked french fry sticks to her inside thigh. "Emily, get me a towel," she says.

When I come back a Tide commercial is on.

We're a little late to the movies because this kid's not twisting his hips when he swings the bat. I told Dad maybe a Hula-Hoop would help, but he laughed and said that was for girls. Then he mentioned an old record he might lend the kid, some guy named Chubby Checker. He laughed again and we got in line for popcorn.

The theatre is dark and some preview is on. The place is so crowded we have to choose from the back rows or the front, *whiplash* seats. I find two seats in the back and squeeze by everyone's legs, careful not to trip like a dummy.

"Here we go," says Dad as the movie starts. He grabs more popcorn.

I take a handful, chew slowly, and wash it down with Coke.

“Can you see OK?” asks Dad.

“Yeah.” The only thing that gets in the way is that the light from the screen makes the bald guy’s head in front of me glow.

Time passes. Dad has just come back with more popcorn...and some Raisinets for me. *Night of the Panther* is good so far, but it’s basically a rip-off of the old black and white werewolf movies. This lady, Catherine, keeps meeting the wrong type of guys. One guy tells her he’s the boss of some company; Catherine goes to the building to find out the guy really works in the mailroom. Another date turns out to be married; Catherine spies the pinkish mark left by a ring, asks for the man’s wallet, and opens it to find pictures of his wife and kids. A third guy gets real drunk and tells her dirty jokes all night. Instead of a personal ad or a video dating service, Catherine visits a gypsy fortune teller. The gypsy makes her repeat some nonsense words, she says it will bring her Mr. Right. But the spell actually makes Catherine turn into a black panther whenever a man makes her angry.

“Did I miss much?” asks Dad.

“Catherine just slaughtered Antonio,” I say and pop a Raisinet in my mouth.

“The Italian bodybuilder?”

“Yeah...He kicked her cat off the bed.”

Dad chews his popcorn. “That lady sure has a temper,” he says.

I pour some more Raisinets into my cupped hand.

“So what’s happening now?”

“This new guy, Graham, he’s a lawyer. He took Catherine to an art gallery but they left early because this other woman kept flirting with Graham. Doesn’t Graham look like a tall Rob Lowe, Dad?”

"Sure does," he agrees and sips his Coke.

On screen, Catherine and Graham are having it out. Graham is nervous. He paces about the kitchen in his tuxedo. Catherine leans against the kitchen sink in her shiny crimson dress. She plays with the ends of her silky dark hair and stares at the floor.

"I'm glad to be out of there," says Graham.

"I found the art gallery fascinating," says Catherine.

"Art is a big lie," says Graham.

"And you're a lawyer," says Catherine, "you seek the truth."

Graham stands before Catherine and takes her hand.

"Tell me the truth, Graham," says Catherine. "Are you still sleeping with Sophia?" Catherine pulls her hand away.

"Listen, Catherine," he says, "it's like I told you, Sophia is an old client."

"And a terrible pop singer."

"So she doesn't write her own music. Nobody does anymore."

Behind Dad and I these older kids are making out. I can hear the sound their lips make. Every once in a while the girl makes the sound of a dog begging for food.

"There's something I have to tell you," says Catherine.

"Let me guess, you're dating Michael Bolton," jokes Graham.

"This is far from funny, Graham."

"He's gonna get it now," I hear the girl behind me say.

"Shutup and kiss me," says the boy.

"While you were busy finding more champagne I went to the bathroom," says Catherine.

Graham paces about the kitchen again.

“Sophia, the pop music princess from hell, walks in. I think she was just using the mirror to adjust her silicone implants.”

Everyone laughs, Dad too.

Catherine approaches Graham, who has his back to her, and says, “I overheard Sophia say, ‘He’d better tell that crimson witch or I will.’”

Graham spins around to face her. “I’ve told Sophia time and time again that it’s over. She’s deluded, Catherine. She’s crazy. Now if you want to believe a pop singer over a successful lawyer, that’s fine. I’ll get your coat and drive you home. But we’ve just met. Give me a chance, Catherine, will you.”

Catherine walks away, but suddenly she turns around. “Let’s have that glass of wine,” she says and flashes a creepy smile. “Where’s the bathroom?” she asks.

“Down that hall,” says Graham.

Catherine struts away.

“Red or white!” shouts Graham.

“Red!” shouts Catherine.

Graham reaches into a cabinet and takes down two wine glasses. He sets the glasses on the kitchen counter. He twists a corkscrew to open the wine, and the scary music, mostly piano and violins, starts playing.

“Stop it,” says the girl behind me.

“Why?” asks the boy.

“Because it’s a good part.”

“So he’s gonna die, big deal.”

“Get your hand out of my shirt and watch the movie.”

I’m so shocked I drop my Raisinets on the floor.

“Lose any?” asks Dad.

“Just a few,” I say as I pick up the bag.

“This should be good,” says Dad.

There is the sound of the toilet flushing. Graham pours the red wine into the glasses. He takes a glass, leans against the kitchen counter, and takes a sip of his wine. “I can put on some Sinatra if you’d like!” he shouts.

In the bathroom, Catherine stares into the mirror. Her eyes turn a fantastic yellow and the iris’ are those of a cat. Her nose begins to shrink and her cheek bones grow. Fine black hairs sprout up all over her face. She turns the ceiling fan on, then growls in pain as claws shoot forth from her fingers. Her breasts slowly disappear, while the changes in her back and shoulders cause the dress to rip. The shape-shifting complete, the black panther heads for the bathroom door. The crimson dress slides right off the beast’s heavy black tail.

However, Catherine forgets to leave the bathroom door open. Catherine as the black panther can’t turn a door knob. So she sits and waits for Graham to lend assistance.

Graham downs the glass of wine and pours another. He walks down the hallway and stands before the bathroom door. He sips his wine and then knocks on the door. “Catherine?” he says.

The black panther’s tail flops back and forth.

Graham knocks again. “Catherine, you OK?” he asks.

The piano and violins get louder.

“Hey, you’re pinching,” says the boy behind me.

“I can’t watch,” says the girl.

“Open your eyes, I paid for this,” says the boy.

Graham sips his wine. “Kinky, huh,” he mutters. “Catherine, I’m coming in.”

“Cat food!” some kid yells.

Part of the audience busts out in laughter.

“Catherine?” says Graham as he slowly opens the door.

The black panther growls and shows its teeth.

“Ahhh!” Graham screams. He collapses against the wall behind him and drops the glass of wine. Things move in slow motion now, Graham runs down the hallway.

The black panther is too quick. She pounces on his back; her weight brings down Graham just as he reaches the white tile of the kitchen floor. His body slides across the floor and we return to the speed of life. He screams and screams. His hands fly about, but it’s no good. She locks onto his throat and blood explodes all over the kitchen floor.

The screen fades to black for a moment. When the scene continues, Catherine holds a navy bath towel over her naked body.

“Boo!” cries a boy down in front.

A lot of guys start laughing.

Catherine reaches for her glass of wine. She takes a big drink. She smiles her creepy smile. “Salvador Dali would have loved this,” she says.

“You want to hold hands?” says the girl behind me.

“No,” says the boy. “This is almost over.”

When we get home, I go upstairs to my room. I turn Kermit’s light on and make sure he’s OK. His triangular head turns, he recognizes me.

“How about the radio,” I say. I turn it on and Madonna’s “Like A Virgin” is in the second verse.

I hold my stomach because it hurts. Must have been the Raisinets. I go to the window that overlooks the back yard. The light is on out there. Dad sneaks up on Mom and wraps his arms around her. She turns her head and yells at him. She hates being surprised. After the praying mantis mates, the

female turns and bites the male's head off. They kind of look like that out there. But Mom would never actually hurt Dad, she just likes to argue. Mom wears garden gloves and her hands flutter about like the wings of a moth. Junebugs cling to the screen and make buzzing sounds with their wings.

I join them in the back yard. "What's happening?" I ask.

"Your mother got every last dandelion," says Dad.

"It was a cool movie, Mom," I say.

"Look at that," says Mom. She points to the cracking paint on the back of our house. "Maybe we should get aluminum siding like the Smiths."

"I'll start painting soon," says Dad.

"You can't put it off," says Mom.

"My stomach hurts," I say.

"I have some Pamprin inside," says Mom. "Take two."

"Emily, use the Pepto-Bismol," says Dad.

I try at a lightning bug and close my hands.

"Did you get it?" asks Dad.

I open my hands a crack. The yellow light tells me enough.

The Christmas Card

I think I could have let the whole thing slide if Nick would have left well enough alone. If he'd been content to remain a fond memory of Melanie's and nothing more – that would put my heart at ease. But as it stands it's December 15th and I'm pacing the floor like a hyperactive child. I pace the floor with a cup of black coffee in hand and wait for the mail to come. I stare out the window and watch the gently falling snow – big flakes, almost the size of cotton balls. I try to sit still and watch Good Morning America, but the hosts – even if they are acting - are way too happy.

So I bounce up, pour more coffee and start to tidy the place up. I put the magazines on the coffee table in a neat stack and I center the vanilla scent candle. I fold the gray afghan and sling it over the sofa. I straighten the welcome mat. I organize the refrigerator, and in doing so I toss out a brown, half-used head of lettuce and a container of leftover wild rice with a thin layer of mold on top. I put the clean dishes away and wipe off the countertops. I even clean out the microwave.

Then I pour more coffee and stroll to the bedroom. I stare at myself in the mirror at the base of the bed: I need to shave, stress has brought a zit to my right cheek, and there are bags under my eyes. I lift my white Hanes T-shirt and pat this winter's pot belly. I think about buying running shoes in the spring. Perhaps I should start morning exercises, try one hundred sit ups and push ups at the crack of dawn like my father has done for years. *Nick is a jogger*, Melanie says.

I set the coffee on the dresser, and hands on hips I stare at the unmade bed. This will be the first time I've made the bed, Melanie may just faint at the sight. In working out the wrinkles in the sheet on her side of the bed, I got to

thinking. Nearly one year ago she lay in this very spot and read Nick's letter to me. The Christmas card it came with was nothing special, most likely one card in a package of twenty five that Nick bought from Walgreen's. On the front of the card were two deer, a mother and her fawn, and they were nestled in the heart of a snow-filled forest. When you opened it up, it read "Peace On Earth" in fancy gold lettering.

However, the card isn't the issue. Many people send their former lovers Christmas cards. Now the letter that accompanied Nick's Christmas card, that's another matter. I was lying there reading but every so often I'd prick up my ears. Nick was teaching, he had just finished writing his first novel, but more importantly, *he'd met someone*. And yet, in the very next part he waxed Woody Allen-ish and downplayed the relationship. He sounded cautious, fearful, cynical – like a man tortured by too much analysis and intuition. It was pure Nick, I thought, the kind of stuff he'd pull for laughs in our fiction writing class in college. As she shared the letter I thought that Nick's words – bright, edgy, funny, endearing – were like Independence Day sparklers in the hands of children kneeling at her feet. By the time Mel folded the letter back up she glowed intensely. Troubled, I closed my book in the middle of a chapter – something I almost never do. Then I rolled atop her, kissed her madly and coaxed her into sex. My hips rocked, her fingers dug into my back, but even that wasn't good enough. I had this sneaking suspicion that somewhere behind her eyes was the image of Nick, flashing his familiar 'cat that ate the canary' grin.

I shake my head and leave the memory behind. I toss our pillows in their place. I pull up the comforter and smooth out the wrinkles. Finished.

I make some toast and stand before the window with my robe open, watching the snow flurries fall slowly. Three inches, the news said, even more expected next week. I think about how the world will soon look: the tree branches caked with snow, puddles frozen into shiny ice patches, snowmen in front yards, and icicles hanging from gutters. The beauty of the midwest. The comfort of the change of seasons.

I leave the window and put on some music, Freddie Hubbard's "Here's That Rainy Day." It's a jazz tune, quite sad but incredibly moving. And though it's snowing, not raining, the tune fits perfect as coffee in the morning and a cold beer at night. I sit on the old blue sofa and finish the toast. Then I pat my belly and rub my tired eyes. I check my watch and it's going on 11:30, still about half an hour until the postman arrives.

I guess that right about now Nick is up and working on a story or a novel. Melanie once said that she felt Nick was incapable of loving anything but the typewriter. I called it dedication. I envied him. From time to time I fiddle with the idea of passing on sunrise sex for a pen and paper, to get back to the place I once was. A simple poem would be enough. But I'm never strong as Nick. I didn't chat much with Nick in our college English courses because I never talk to anyone who willingly dominates a conversation. Nick always made it a point to let you know that he was smarter than you; he'd steal your breath, pat you on the back and walk away gloating. But Nick knows nothing of jazz. He doesn't know Hubbard, Coltrane, Miles, Bird, Coleman or Mingus. He's a classical man, Mel says, a Mahler freak.

In the bedroom I slip on my oldest pair of Levi's and put on a navy colored sweatshirt. From the closet in the front room I retrieve my deck shoes and tie them on tight. I grab my set of keys and trot downstairs to check the mail. I open the box but there's nothing. On a whim I peek outside to see if

the mailman might be coming down the hill. Snow flurries fall upon my face and quickly melt. Sadly, there is no sign of the mailman, not even his postal truck anywhere in the distance. Across the street, a bearded man in a camouflage jacket watches his German shepherd take a crap in somebody else's lawn.

I go back inside, and near the top of the stairs I run into old widow O'Connor. She wears what has to be one of only three outfits, a pink terrycloth robe and matching fuzzy slippers. A cigarette dangles from her lips. She braces herself on the side rail and asks, "Is it here, yet?"

I shake my head. "Maybe the snow has slowed him down."

"This ain't nothing," she replies. "I remember a few years ago it snowed nearly thirteen inches. Damn snow blocked the doorway but he got the mail here somehow. The roads were so bad I missed my beauty shop appointments for two weeks. I nearly ran out of food. Cat food too. Ever try to get a kitty to eat leftover meatloaf?" She takes a drag off her smoke.

"No," I say and try to creep closer to my apartment.

"Oh my!" she exclaims. "The damn cat wouldn't have it. He finally settled

on bologna. Go figure," she adds and draws the cigarette to her unpainted lips.

I fake a smile - respecting my elders, I tell myself. Widow O'Connor looks as

though she's musing over the past, and so I politely tell her that her cigarette is about to ash on the floor and bolt for my apartment.

At noon Mel arrives for lunch. She caught me drying the dishes, and by the look on her face she expected to find me sleeping. I work nights at the White Hen Pantry.

We embrace, and as always I feel like the luckiest man alive. Mel is more than I ever hoped for. She is petite and spunky. She is a brunette with big brown eyes, a small sharp nose, and supple lips. She can be softly affectionate or incredibly erotic. She brings out the best in me.

I make deli-style turkey sandwiches, hers with American cheese and Miracle whip and mine simply plain. On the side of each plate I add a pickle.

“Dressed already,” she says, surprised.

“Yes,” I mumble with my mouth full. I swallow and then add, “I have some things to do.”

“Like what?”

I sip my Coca-Cola. “I thought I might string some lights,” I say.

She takes a bite of her sandwich and with a napkin clears Miracle Whip from the corner of her mouth. “Too bad there’s no room for a tree,” she says.

“I know. Maybe I can find a real small one.”

“Maybe. I love the scent of a real tree.”

“Me too.”

“Hey,” she says, a gleam in her brown eyes, “don’t forget about mistletoe.”

“In every room,” she orders and drinks her Coke. “Even the bathroom - that way I can kiss your face first thing after you shave.”

I lean back and laugh. “Then it’s done, mistletoe in every room by four o’clock today,” I promise. I gather up our plates and rinse them under hot water in the kitchen sink. Mel surprises me by wrapping her arms around my hips. I stack the plates in the left basin of the sink and turn to face her, Mel in her navy blue dress coat and slacks, cream colored belt and silky white shirt.

Only weeks ago she shocked the hell out of me by getting her long brunette hair cut in a bob. Could be wishful thinking, but very often marriage

snips away the long locks that men lust after. The idea - I think I heard it first on Ricki Lake - is that the married woman no longer needs to attract other men and so she chops off the long, youthful strands.

"I have to get back to work," says Mel, her head resting upon my shoulder.

"Back to the crazies," I joke. Melanie is the receptionist for Dr. Nathan Ambrose, the area's most respected head shrink.

"Not so crazy these days, mostly depressed."

"Yes, the holidays."

"A bottle of Prozac in every stocking."

She breaks away gently. We lock into a gaze. Then we kiss.

"How is my lipstick?" she asks.

"Not a smudge."

She grabs her purse off the sofa and heads for the door. "Happy decorating," she wishes.

"Drive safely!" I call out as I stand in the doorway and watch her go. I think of mistletoe hanging in every room. Then I hear Mel open the mailbox in the foyer. I want to bolt down the stairs and take the mail off her hands. Tell her something like I'm expecting my last check from the bagel factory I used to work in through a temp service. But I know how awkward that will look. Mel, who spends her days directing the emotionally disturbed into Dr. Nathan Ambrose's office, will certainly see right through me. And there isn't any time for postal chivalry anyway, because Anna is expecting me for lunch in less than half an hour.

It isn't the wisest thing to call my ex-girlfriend and invite her to lunch. Even more foolish to ask her to meet me at The Corner, a small pub (corner of

Baker and Clark) that was once “our place.” Yet I really had no choice. My problem couldn’t be solved by my closest male friends; their opinions – being men and fairly macho – would be highly biased.

The meeting wasn’t meant to rekindle a fond romance. Anna Jones and I were over. Sure she was beautiful, long legs, green eyes and a flowing mane of tight red curls. Moreover, she loved Woody Allen movies. She loved the voice of Billy Holiday. She enjoyed playing Scrabble. She chose beer over strawberry daquiris. She even fulfilled one of my greatest fantasies - to date a bank teller. But Anna was a creature of disturbing silences. I’d be talking, she’d appear to be listening, but then when it was her turn to speak she’d clam up. I tried reverse psychology, barely uttering a word and allowing her to lead the conversation, but the verbal yield was never great enough to satisfy me. Sometimes I felt like I’d purchased a blow-up doll sex toy. So finally I called it quits. Anna was heartbroken. For a month she tried to patch things up. Then one Saturday night she picked the wrong time to call, a period of afterglow between Melanie and me. The phone rang seven times before I picked it up.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hey,” Anna said, “sorry it’s so late but I saw your car.”

I looked at Melanie and made a very puzzled face. “No, Henry doesn’t live here,” I said.

“David, it’s *Anna*,” she said.

“You must have the wrong number,” I said. Melanie crawled out from under the sheets and motioned for the phone.

“If you have company, David, just say so,” said Anna angrily.

Then Melanie tugged at my plain white boxer shorts and said, “Hurry up, baby, so we can do it again!”

I pulled my shorts up and said, "I told you, Henry doesn't live here," but Anna had already hung up.

I walk to the back room of The Corner where there are booths, and sure enough Anna Jones has already arrived. I blush a bit as I approach because she has chosen the booth we used to sit in; it lies beyond the small salad bar against the far wall – the most private booth. I slide in and say, "Sorry I'm late. This snow has brought on some monstrous traffic."

Anna's cream colored jacket is zipped up tight. Bordering the hood is what appears to be rabbit fur. Her left hand holds firm to a draft beer, and in the other is a freshly lit cigarette – the minty smell tells me it's menthol. She exhales and smiles. "I've only been here five minutes," she confesses.

"You smoke now."

"And I'm seeing a therapist."

"Oh," I say and lower my head as if to apologize.

"Her name is Sondra Gordon," she tells me and exhales a thick cloud of smoke against the mirror on the wall. "She's great. She's really opened me up. Now I say what I think and feel nearly all the time. I never thought it would be so easy."

"Well, speech... That's what the mouth is there for, isn't it." Oh Christ! What am I saying! Anna refused to perform oral sex; what if she remembers the arguments?

"And eating too. I'm famished. Where is that waiter?" she asks and cocks her head to have a look around the place.

"So how is work?" I ask.

"The same. I handle a lot of money but never see much of it myself."

"Nice coat. Real fur?"

"Nah, it's fake," Anna admits. She sips her beer and spies her face in the mirror.

"You nervous, Anna?" I ask.

"No, why?"

"Your coat is still on."

"Yours too."

I laugh and remove my Navy p-coat. "Now you," I direct. Anna balances her cigarette on the ashtray and unzips the cream colored winter coat.

"I hope I haven't shocked you. It's been a long time," I say.

"A little over a year," she says and sips her beer.

"Seems longer...But I use a different bank now and so I never –"

"Funny how you switched banks after the break-up," she snaps and then plucks the cigarette back into her mouth.

"I was uncomfortable," I confess.

"And man's instinct to flee is far greater than a woman's."

"You get that from Sondra?"

She smiles. "No, my mother, I think."

"Listen, Anna, I don't want you to get the wrong –"

"Can I take your order?" a tall slender man in a wrinkled white shirt asks.

He surprises me so much I almost bite my tongue. I compose myself.

"You know what you want?" I ask Anna.

"Yes, I'll have the Italian beef and fries," she orders.

"Italian beef and fries." the man repeats, marks it down. He turns to me.

"And how about you?" he asks.

"I'd like a Black and Tan."

"Anything else?"

“No, I’m just thirsty.”

The tall, thin man darts to the kitchen. Anna crushes her cigarette in the ashtray and turns her head to one side. “Are you OK?” she whispers.

Anna’s tight red curls flop over her ears and I picture a cocker spaniel.

“Just fine,” I say. “I’ve already eaten.”

“My, that’s rude.”

“I know, but”

“Invite me to lunch”

“With the intention of talking.”

Anna straightens up, her pert breasts strain forward under the tight red sweater. “I’m no shrink, David,” she groans.

I lean in closer to her, “I know, I know. I just want your advice,” I say.

“You could have called for that.”

“It’s my impression that would have been twice as rude.”

The tall, thin man appears and nearly spills the Black and Tan as he sets it down. I notice his slight resemblance to Laurel of Laurel and Hardy. “How we doing here?” he asks.

“Fine,” I say. “Great.” The waiter leaves and I bring the Black and Tan to my lips. Anna’s bright green eyes wander around the place, obviously disturbed. I wipe a touch of Guinness foam off my mouth and think about how to make this easier for both of us.

Anna’s gaze finally returns. “I don’t know which is uglier, David, this situation or that beer,” she jokes.

“Probably the beer... What do you know about jealousy?” I ask.

“Only that it’s a big waste of time.”

“What do you mean?”

"I mean, David, that it gets you nowhere. A woman may be flattered by a jealous partner – it means he truly cares about her. But if he's overly jealous the woman usually leaves the relationship," says Anna and draws another cigarette from the pack.

"So how does a man keep from becoming an obsessive asshole?" I ask.

Anna inhales the cigarette, lets the smoke free and says, "A woman has the right to be as social as a man. What's fair is fair. But the minute she's caught in extended hugs or prolonged glances, you have to wonder."

"And what if the woman's ex-boyfriend is still a good *friend*?"

"Am I getting paid for this?" she jokes.

"I'll buy your lunch."

"Thanks," she says and taps the cigarette on the ashtray. "David, ex-boyfriends don't get special privileges. Once your partner has been intimate with somebody else then it's over. You have to break it off," she adds.

"No second chances?"

"Never," says Anna and crushes the spent cigarette in the ashtray. "Because then there will be a third and a fourth and maybe even a fifth chance."

I laugh and take a big gulp from the pint glass. "You're brutal," I tell her.

"Well, Sondra lays the assertiveness training on pretty thick," says Anna and crosses her arms. "So tell me, what are you guilty of, David?" she asks with a smirk.

"Only a touch of the green-eyed monster."

Anna tosses me a warm look. "Be thankful for what you have, David," she says. She rises to her feet. "I'm going to find our funny looking waiter," she says. "My stomach is growling."

I stay long enough to watch her eat. She gives me some spare french fries and a couple of pepperoncinis. Finished, she dabs her mouth with a napkin and then presents a Christmas card. On the front is a Norman Rockwell look-alike: children in a snowball fight outside a small home. Smoke rises out of the chimney and gives it a very cozy feel. When I open the card, I'm awestruck and a bit sad. Anna had included a wallet sized photograph. She wore very little makeup. Her flowing, tight red curls lay perfect over a pine-green, strapless dress. She tells me to turn the picture over and give it some thought. Anna had written, "A New Year, A New Beginning?" on the back of the picture. I thank her and put the card in the large hip pocket of my Navy p-coat. I tell her that I'm sorry I have nothing for her, but I know that no gift, no favorite paperback or Billie Holiday cassette tape will do. What she wants I cannot give - that belongs to somebody else, somebody I love. Looking anything but jolly, Anna leaves without saying goodbye.

Right after lunch I hit Wal-Mart and purchase four bunches of plastic mistletoe, an extra long string of lights (the kind equipped with ten different flashing modes), a big, hollowed-out Santa figure, and a Bing Crosby Christmas cassette tape. Once home, I string the lights in the expansive front room - they manage to wrap around nearly every square inch - and stick plump old Santa under the lamp on the end table. Then I hang mistletoe over the sink in the kitchen, in the bathroom - followed by laughter - and over the mattress in the bedroom. The final bunch will hang in the doorway, so I slide the desk chair over the wood floor, stand atop the chair and center the mistletoe over the door.

I push the thumb tack into the old ceiling tile and to my surprise there is a knock at the door. Shocked, I nearly fall off of the chair. "Just a minute," I holler. I climb down and push the chair away from the door. Then I peer

through the eye hole and shake my head in disbelief: it's Nick and he's brought someone with him. I come unglued, my heart starts racing and I fight to breathe. Say what you will about the Girl Scouts and Mormons, but I'd much rather deal with that than the man who used to hold Melanie in his arms.

"Hello, David," says Nick with a firm handshake. "Merry Christmas. I see there's no school today. Funny, the roads aren't that bad."

"I'm not substitute teaching anymore."

"Oh?"

"This kid, Chaz Palmer, fifth hour English class, punched me in the face for giving him an F."

"Kids are brutal these days."

"He got suspended."

Nick wears a long black trench coat, and beneath it a thick cotton sweater the color of coffee with double cream. His smoky gray khakis look brand new.

"David, this is my fiancée, Sylvia Swanson." The woman emerges from behind Nick and shakes my hand as well. Her touch is soft and gentle.

"Nice to meet you," I say. Sylvia is tall and slender, with fine, long blonde hair. Her face is narrow and her eyes a striking blue. The eyebrows are long and thin and her nose small and sharp. Her lips are very supple and touched lightly with deep rose lipstick. Sylvia is decked out quite festively indeed: a green sweater with a tiny gold pin (an angel blowing its horn), a red and green, plaid mini-skirt and black stockings. All I can think is how perfectly she fits the devilish Veronica Lake mold.

"I see we've caught you by surprise," says Nick and pats me on the shoulder. "We're on our way to see Sylvia's parents. You know how it is," he says with a smile, 'tis the season to visit the ones you love."

Or *still* do, I think. I bite my bottom lip and say, "I know how you feel, Nick."

Nick scans the room like a fire inspector. "I see that you're ready for the holidays," he says. He points to the mistletoe hanging above the three of us. "Just don't get any funny ideas," he directs Sylvia and me.

I laugh, the uncomfortable kind of laugh. "Here, you two sit down," I say. Nick removes his trench coat and tosses it over the end of the sofa. He sits down and peels his black driving gloves off. Sylvia slinks down beside Nick and crosses her legs. One leg bounces nervously while she watches the shifting tempo of the flashing Christmas lights. "How about some coffee?" I ask.

"Great," says Nick. "Light on the cream and sugar. Coffee, honey?" he asks Sylvia and gives her a squeeze just above the knee.

"David, do you have any hot chocolate?" Sylvia shouts from the front room.

"Sure do... Melanie can't stand coffee," I add.

"She still love chamomille tea?" asks Nick.

I nearly swallow my tongue. "Yes, but lately she's been on this green tea with lemon kick," I tell him.

When I return, both of them are sifting through magazines from atop the oak coffee table. I set the cutting board down – an improvised serving tray – and take my coffee. "Have at it," I tell them.

"Nicholas here wanted to look at the Playboy but I threatened to slap him," jokes Sylvia.

"I only wanted to read the millenium fiction by Kurt Vonnegut," says Nick.

"It doesn't matter, Nick," scolds Sylvia. "Don't you know that Playboy has set it up so that even if you try to concentrate on the articles you become distracted halfway into it by some airbrushed naked girl."

"Let me test that hypothesis." Nick folds the Rolling Stone closed and reaches out to the pile of magazines.

"Freeze, buddy," cries Sylvia. She pushes Nick's arm away. "Let's be polite," she tells him. Sylvia stacks the Rolling Stone on top of the Cosmopolitan magazine she's been reading and sets them aside.

I pull up the desk chair and ask, "So what brings you this way?"

Nick sets his coffee down. "Sylvia grew up in Arcola...I have to put up with her mother, Rose, for nearly a week."

"Come on, you like my mother," Sylvia retorts. "He's kidding, David. You should see him. He offers to help Mom with the dishes. He watches reruns of Murder, She Wrote. If this snow amounts to anything he'll be shoveling her walk." Sylvia sips her cocoa and smiles.

"You understand, David, it's all a ploy so that Mrs. Swanson will give us her blessing," says Nick with a grin. He crosses his legs and holds the coffee cup atop his bony knee.

"I thought the fathers were the hardest ones to win over," I say.

Nick turns to Sylvia, waiting. Sylvia lowers her head. I think that perhaps I didn't stir the cocoa well enough and a crusty particle is floating on top. But then Sylvia flashes her bright blue eyes in my direction: "My father died two years ago. Lung cancer."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Don't be. How could you know?" Sylvia sips more cocoa, "My father, he was careless. He kept on smoking his non-filters even after his doctor advised him to quit," she adds.

“Well, we all have addictions we never quite beat,” I propose.

“Sure,” says Nick and straightens his posture. This was familiar body language to me, I’d seen it all the time in our college English courses together. It meant that Nick was about to say something he felt to be profound. “It can be a *chemical* addiction: alcohol, nicotine, marijuana. Or maybe it’s *psychological*: obsessive compulsive behavior, eating disorders, the dozens of former lovers turned stalkers,” he expounds like a college professor.

Sylvia yanks a loose thread off Nick’s sweater. “And don’t forget about literature addicts,” she quips. “And writers with fingers glued to the keys and bloodshot, computer weary eyes.”

Nick rests his free palm just above Sylvia’s knee. Sylvia covers his hand with her own. “I just finished my second novel,” he gloats.

“What happened to the first?” I ask.

Sylvia begins to laugh. Nick removes his hand from Sylvia’s knee and says, “I put it aside for now.”

“Along with the rejection letters,” adds Sylvia.

Nick glares at Sylvia and then turns to me. “At present it’s a hard book to sell,” he tells me. “No lawyers. No serial killers. No private detectives. And nobody who talks to horses,” he adds.

“So what’s it all about?”

“Valentino here wrote a love story,” says Sylvia.

“Excuse her, David. Sylvia always breaks everything down to one sentence.”

Sylvia crosses her arms and looks away, dejected.

“My novel takes place in high school,” Nick begins. “Two varsity wrestlers help a once lackluster team win the conference trophy...and inbetween they compete for the love of the same girl.”

Sylvia's crossed leg bounces. She is adamantly quiet. I feel sorry for her. She'll soon be married to a self-centered windbag. I'd like to put my fingers in my ears. But it's nearly Christmas, Nick can consider this a gift.

Nick's hands flutter about like sparrows as he speaks. "The one kid, Graham I called him, is the type that excels at everything. He's on the honor roll. He's the president of the French club. He's on the speech team. Graham's real handsome and a snappy dresser as well. So, you see, Graham's used to getting just about anything he wants." Sylvia twists the ends of her shimmering blonde hair around a finger and looks on. Nick draws a breath and continues: "But Jesse, in the weight class below Graham, also desires Sophia's love. Jesse is Graham's polar opposite. His grades are horrible. He rides a skateboard to school. Heavy metal music buzzes from his headphones like a chainsaw when he walks the halls. His blue jeans are ripped and he never wears a shirt with a collar. He does his hair like Ted Nugent and he has a tattoo of Wolverine on his left shoulder. Sounds pretty worthless, huh?" Nick asks.

"Sounds like my little brother," I say. God, make him stop!

Nick laughs. "See, David, wrestling becomes a way for Jesse to channel his anger, his scholarly failures, his –"

"Jealousy of Graham," Sylvia interrupts.

"True," Nick agrees and pats Sylvia on the knee.

"It's a very cute story, really," adds Sylvia. "The team's singlets are even green."

"Nice touch," I say and nod my head. I think I can take Nick, I tell myself. A good hip toss to the wood floor. Maybe put him in the cradle and squeeze tight. I can pin the frail bastard in under two minutes.

Nick runs his fingers through his goatee and then says, "What I like best about the tale is how wrestling becomes this metaphor for love. The wrestler's limbs entwined as they writhe like snakes on that mat. A struggle. An embrace. Love is a battle."

Sylvia laughs at Nick's comment. "Don't believe a word, David," she says. "Nick likes the novel because it lets him exercise his adolescent tendencies. Nick still listens to Guns 'n' Roses, you know," she jokes.

"Well, I don't have any Axel Rose," I say and rise to my feet. "But I do have this." I start the CD player, John Coltrane's "Lush Life". "More coffee, Nick?" I ask. "More cocoa, Sylvia?"

Sylvia rises from the sofa, "I'll get it, David," she says. "After all, we're the intruders." She gathers our cups and strolls into the kitchen.

"The cocoa is in the cabinet above the stove!" I shout.

"Gotcha!" she answers.

"John Coltrane," I brag and return to my seat. I gently tap my foot in rhythm.

"Didn't this guy choke on his own vomit?" Nick asks.

"No, you're thinking of Jimi Hendrix," I correct him and gnaw on my fingernail to keep from laughing. "John Coltrane died of a heroin overdose."

Sylvia soon appears with the coffee and cocoa, this time balanced on a dinner plate. *Serving tray*, I make a mental note for my next trip to Wal-Mart.

"You telling dirty stories, Nicholas?" she jokes. She sets the dinner plate atop the cutting board and returns to her seat. The three of us reach for our hot drinks. Sylvia crosses her legs and blows on her cocoa. "So where is your better half?" she asks.

I didn't want to do it. But the eyes, the smile, the look of Veronica Lake on Sylvia's face – and the engagement ring on her finger – all made me think, what the hell. It's nearly a quarter past four, Melanie will arrive any moment, and I'm busy doing my part, sitting on the sofa and thumbing through the TV Guide.

I thought about the luck I'd run into. Within a year or two, Nick will be married to Sylvia. No need to worry about phone calls or Christmas cards. It's a sure bet that Mel will forget about him quick as burnt toast...or grilled cheese sandwiches, which she burns quite often. I flip from page to page and ignore all of it. I play my part and wait for my cue.

Shortly thereafter comes the turn of the key in the lock. I hop to and await the entrance of Melanie. The smooth saxophone of John Coltrane plays softly in the background. With the front door agape I take Melanie in my arms and force a deep kiss. I'm going for the screen kiss, Michael Douglas and Sharon Stone. Melanie retreats, spies the mistletoe hanging in the entrance and says, "You weren't kidding."

"I promised," I say and help her out of her coat. Melanie passes by and makes for the bathroom.

Melanie returns, sits down next to me and slings her arm over my shoulder. "Something about Christmas lights makes me tingle all over," she says.

"You sure it wasn't the kiss," I joke.

"David," she speaks with a hint of dread, "With all this mistletoe hanging about we may have bruised lips by Christmas morning."

"I think we'll manage," I say and kiss her softly. A familiar glow spreads across Melanie's face and it occurs to me that I'd better get back to the plan before we end up in the bedroom. "I have a surprise for you," I declare.

"You OK, baby?" she asks and checks my head for a fever.

I smile, "Dandy as candy," I say.

"I mean, you've been a little stressed lately and... You didn't get into my red wine today, did you?" she jokes. Melanie's nose twitches as she smells my breath. "Coffee," she says.

"Very good. Nothing's up, I just want to make sure our first Christmas together is memorable."

"So where's my surprise?"

"Over there, in the closet."

Melanie rises, walks to the oddly designed, large closet and reaches for the knob. I catch up with her and from behind I cover up her eyes. "David, how will I find my gift if I can't see?" she asks.

"Open the door and hold your arms out. I'll hand it to you."

Mel slowly turns the knob and steps back. "Keep your eyes closed," I order and remove my hands. But I don't come forward to fetch her surprise; instead I take two steps back, cross my arms and wait. Melanie certainly does look silly, I think, like a zombie in search of an umbrella. Call the movie, *Day of the Dead in Monsoon Season*.

"Find it yet?" she calls out. My tan raincoat falls to the floor of the closet, then comes the tinkling sound of unused hangers brushed sideways. Nick emerges from the closet and wraps Melanie up in his arms. One move too many, I think, overly dramatic. But it only takes the image of Nick and Sylvia, a huge church and Nick gently lifting her veil to calm me down.

"Merry Christmas," he says.

Melanie's body jolts free like she's stuck her finger in a socket. "Nick, what are you doing in my closet?" she asks through faint laughter.

"Don't you remember our conversation last week?" Nick asks.

“Yes, but I didn’t think by *passing through* you meant you’d stop by.”

Sylvia bursts from the closet and the hangers sound off once more.

Sylvia extends her hand, “Hi, I’m Sylvia Swanson,” she says. Melanie greets Sylvia with apprehension, and I get the idea that Nick never mentioned bringing company.

I go to Mel’s side and wrap my arm around her hip. “Sylvia here is Nick’s fiancée,” I announced with perhaps a bit too much joy.

“That’s right,” says Nick. He holds Sylvia close. It’s like we’re playing the mirror game that actors practice. “We’re getting married this June, the thirteenth,” says Nick and kisses Sylvia on the forehead. The glowing couple then return to the couch.

“How lucky,” Mel quips.

“It’s my birthday,” says Sylvia. Her perfect cheeks are red with excitement.

“Why not the day you met?” Mel asks. She bristles with indifference.

“Hmmm,” ponders Sylvia and looks to Nick.

“Because that was an ice storm,” says Nick, “the first week in February.”

“Yes, yes. Let me tell this,” says Sylvia to Nick.

“Can’t wait,” mutters Melanie. For that I give her hip a good pinch.

“My girlfriends and I were at the movies. The theatre downtown, it shows classics. We were watching *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*... you know, who doesn’t love Audrey Hepburn –“

“I’m a Grace Kelly fan,” Mel blurts out.

“Mel, let her finish,” I scold.

“It’s alright, David,” says Nick. “Mel’s always been a grand interrupter.”

“I’m just stating a difference of opinion.”

“And quite forcefully too.”

“Excuse me, it’s Christmas time,” I say. “Peace, love, joy-“

“Grumpy shoppers and damn Salvation Army bells,” barks Melanie.

Sylvia finally cuts in, “So anyway, the movie ends and my girlfriends and I go out the back exit. The freezing rain felt like needles being stuck in your face. My friend, Amanda, slipped and fell on the ice. It took forever to get to the car. We finally make it and the doors are frozen shut. Christine finds this stick and she starts stabbing at the ice. But the stick breaks. Some of the girls are shouting, cursing, making a scene. Then all of a sudden, like right out of *Sleeping Beauty* or *Cinderella*, comes Nick with this can. He sprays all the edges of the door and like magic the doors open. I got into my purse – you know, I felt bad he had to waste all that stuff in the can – but all Nick wanted was my phone number.”

“Amazing the way things happen,” says Melanie. For this I step on her toes and she makes a face.

“All true,” says Nick and gives Sylvia a squeeze.

A bit later the four of us toast Nick and Sylvia’s impending marriage. Nick thinks it’s funny that the gamay beaujolais is chilled. He tells us that room temperature is much more enjoyable. Sylvia doesn’t care one way or the other. Wine is wine, she says. Melanie agrees and I nearly have a stroke. Nick compliments the music and I tell him about Freddie Hubbard. He advises me to pick up some Mozart, and adds that studies have shown that listening to his works boosts one’s intelligence. Melanie hails Patsy Cline. Sylvia prefers Shania Twain, she even sings us the first verse of “Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under.”

Nick is the first to put his glass down and climb from the sofa. He walks to the window and peers through the blinds, “It’s getting dark,” he says.

Nick uses the bathroom and Sylvia follows suit. He helps her with her coat. "Nice meeting you," says Sylvia and slips her green gloves on.

"You bet," I say and give her a hug – a very quick hug so as not to spark Melanie. Sylvia smiles at Melanie, but she doesn't catch it. She has her hands full of empty wine glasses and walks to the kitchen. The water begins to run.

Nick grabs his heavy trench coat and once it's on he makes sure that it appears perfect. "David," he says and takes hold of my all-too-ready hand, "I give you full permission to jump out of my closet next year."

"I may take you up on that," I lie through my wine-stained teeth. My money is on Melanie, and judging by her mood a chapter in her short life has come to a discouraging end. She will never want to see or hear from Nick again.

"What's this?" asks Sylvia.

The water from the faucet comes to a halt. Melanie returns.

Nick and I turn to find Sylvia opening the Christmas card from Anna that I'd tucked away in my coat pocket at lunch. In fetching his coat, Nick had knocked mine to the floor. Sylvia, the curious cat, has retrieved the card.

"You look so different in this picture," says Sylvia.

Mel peers over Sylvia's bony shoulder. "That's not me," she whispers.

Nick turns to me and raises an eyebrow. He knows I'm in deep shit.

"Put that down, Sylvia," he directs. "We're going."

I can still hear the patter of Nick and Sylvia's steps down the stairs when Mel tears Anna's picture in two and tosses it in my face. "Making deposits to your bank teller ex!" she cries.

"We had lunch today, that's it."

"What did you have for dessert?" she asks.

“Nothing. Nothing. I had to talk to her.”

“What about me!” she shouts and pats her chest. “You can’t talk to me?”

“I was scared,” I admit and take two steps towards her.

“Don’t touch me!” she spits. She tosses her coat on, shoves me out of the way, and grabs her keys off the kitchen counter.

I block her way. “Mel, listen. I’ll tell you the whole thing. I know it doesn’t make sense now but – “

“Damn right it makes no sense! I’ve got mistltoe above me, wine on my breath and a cheating boyfriend!” Mel coughs. “Now get away from the door,” she orders in a cough- husky voice much like Kathleen Turner’s.

“I want to talk to you.”

Melanie coughs some more. “What can you say today that you couldn’t say yesterday.”

“Everything.”

Melanie turns around and scampers to the kitchen. She takes a glass from the cabinet and slams the door shut. She pours a cold glass of water and chugs it. “I’ve lost my damn voice,” she says.

“Yeah, you sound like that kid on the Little Rascals,” I joke. I’m willing to try anything.

Melanie begins to sob. She sinks into a chair at the kitchen table and covers her teary face. “How long have you been seeing her?” the muffled voice asks.

I sit near the door, plenty far enough to avoid any quick jabs or kicks. “Mel, I’m not seeing Anna. We ate lunch. I needed her advice and she thought I wanted her back. That explains the Christmas card, the picture.”

Mel wipes the tears from her eyes with the ends of her coat. Her fair skin is pink as carnations. “David, what are you scared of?” she asks.

“What?” I’m too caught up in her sad little face to realize the nature of her question.

“You said you were too scared to come to me,” she says and then sniffles.

I force the tiny wheels of the chair in her direction. “I’m scared of the green eyed monster, Mel,” I whisper.

“Jealousy?”

“Jealousy.”

I take Mel’s trembling hand in my own. I think, God, please let her trust me. She looks away but her hand remains still. “Every day for the last month I’ve been dreading the mail. You talk about Nick’s Christmas cards and I see it in your face – there’s something left that I can’t make you forget. Every day I practically knock old widow O’Connor on her butt as I race for the mail.”

“He made a phone call this year.”

“Nick is getting married.”

“Say it again if it makes you go from green to red, red rosy.”

I push the tiny wheels of the chair even farther. “I want you to be happy,” I whisper. I put my arm around her and the seats of the kitchen chairs meet. “Be happy with *me*, Mel,” I add.

She cowers in my arms and I can hear her sobbing start up again. I hold her tight and I rock her gently. She keeps up so that a tear comes to my eye. I fight it like any man on any block in America or anyplace else. And like any sad note from a saxophone – John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Lester Young – the weeping must come to an end. Melanie’s tears fade into sniffing and gasps, and finally she looks me in the eye. She fixes her thumb at the corner of my eye and spreads my tears out like Monet with paint, a canvas and a good landscape. “You worry too much,” she says.

Later we lie in bed under the mistletoe. It twists around like things sometimes do when hung from the ceiling. Something only Einstein and his peers can really explain. We leave the Christmas lights on and the light trails into the room, adding warmth and holiday cheer. In the afterglow there is petting, soft breathing and the kind of eye-to-eye that not even Freud or Jung could have properly psychoanalyzed. It feels good to have slain the green eyed beastly inside of me. I feel properly knighted by the queen beside me. I feel stronger than I have in days.

“It isn’t love, you know,” Mel whispers.

“I hope you don’t mean *this*.”

“No, what I feel for Nick.”

“You mean what you felt for Nick.”

“No, what I feel for Nick.”

“Which is... And I’m crossing my fingers under these covers.”

“The fondness of memory.”

“Will it stay in the attic?”

“With the rest of my toys,” Mel jokes. Then she ducks under the covers and shortly I feel my boxer shorts creep past my knees.

“This an early Christmas present?” I ask.

Mel can’t speak and neither can I.

The Burn

"Your mother hates me," I say as I check the speedometer.

"She does not. You were just nervous again."

"No," I disagree. I'm going 65 right on the mark. "She was staring and she didn't blink once. She wouldn't make conversation."

"First of all," says Kate and fiddles with the radio, "all of us blink – we have to, we're not lizards. Secondly," she adds over the static, "you were tight lipped as well." She fiddles with the knob some more. She finds a country song and eases back in her seat.

"What was I going to talk about, the pepperoni pizza in her lap? The overstuffed ashtray on the arm of the chair?"

"Henry, you're in the middle of the road."

"Tell her I agree that Billy Dee Williams in *The Billie Holiday Story* is hot?"

"You're horrible," says Kate. She toys with the knob until the song comes in perfect. "C-r-a-z-y," she croons along, "Crazy for feeling so l-o-n-e-l-y." She has a beautiful voice, sang in the church choir before her father died.

I watch the road. A silver mini-van passes on the left; there is some sort of mashed animal on the other side of the road. "You know what else," I say. I still can't let it go, the burning feeling brought on by the visit. "Your mother kept blowing smoke in my direction the whole time."

Kate stops singing. "So she lacks smoker's etiquette. So what?"

"It's yet another signal, that's what."

"A smoke signal," she jokes.

I catch her long, cat-like smile out of the corner of my eye. "Ha-ha... I'm talking about yet another sign that she hates me."

"Henry, you read too much into things... Trailers for sale or rent," she sings along with a brand new song.

"Whatever," I say and shake my head. A huge RV approaches; I wonder who is inside, what they're up to.

"...I aint got no c-i-g-a-r-e-t-t-e-s," she sings all too loudly.

"Here, smell my shirt."

"Why?"

"Just take a sniff of my sleeve," I order and speed up to pass the RV.

Kate leans into me and touches her dainty nose to the sleeve of my grey cotton shirt. She sits up and smiles at me, "You smell like Junior Mint candy," she tells me with a snicker.

"Great, just great."

"It could be worse, my mother could smoke stinky cigars."

A black BMW races past. Soon it's nothing but a black dot in the distance. Overhead, the fiery sun emerges through a dense mass of cumulonimbus clouds. "My mother quit smoking," I brag.

"Sure, but she drinks. And way too much."

"Now, now. The last time we visited, you know, Easter, the patio, hamburgers and hot dogs, all she drank was Cokes. Remember?"

"Yes, but it was rum and Cokes."

"It was not," I say and check my speed. The needle says 60 miles per hour and so I touch the accelerator. "She wasn't drunk."

"But she was drinking."

"Look, I'm her son. I would know."

"But you weren't the one that had a piece of hamburger go down the wrong pipe. I started to gag and she gave me her glass...and I tasted rum."

"Hmm? Funny I didn't smell it when we hugged goodbye."

“That’s because your brother put too much garlic salt on the hamburgers.”

I imagine the taste of a well-grilled hamburger – minus the excess garlic salt. Her mother didn’t expect our little visit and so we went away hungry. I’m starving, now imagining bratwurst with mustard, potato slices wrapped in foil. I swear I’m salivating bad as one of Pavlov’s dogs.

Kate pats my thigh, “Drifting again,” she complains.

“I think it’s the car, maybe the steering column.”

“I think it’s your mind. Stuck on my mother again.”

“No, I’m over that. If your mother wants to die of lung cancer that’s fine with me.”

“Hey!” she shouts.

“Careful, that’s my *ear* drum, not a bass drum.”

Kate crosses her pleasantly tanned arms and stares out the window. It’s a good bet – though all I can see is her fine, long auburn hair – that she’s biting her lip, angry. “If your mother wants to die from liver cancer – well, I don’t care either,” she retorts.

The news has come on the radio. The weatherman, so chipper he sounds more like a salesman, says a fifty-fifty chance of rain. A lot like life, I think to myself. I look up out the window to notice the clouds have taken over again.

“Henry, look at me,” she orders.

“Yes, you look nice. My favorite sun dress – love the violets.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“And I’m trying to watch the road like you said.”

“I love my mother,” says Kate. She repeats this and then sticks her thumbs in her ears and her tongue in my face.

“Been watching Sesame Street again?”

Kate sits back and forces a sigh. “I love my mother,” she mutters.

“Well, I *like* your mother. Odds are love will take years,” I admit.

We visit her mother way too often – too many weekends spent on the highway from Charleston to Bloomington and back again. Her mother writes these manic letters of discontent and sorrow, complete with the occasional ash droppings from cigarettes or smeared ink from crying. She’s a widow. She’s a postal employee. She’s overweight. She has chronic chest pains and lives in fear of a heart attack. Her problems are well documented in the letters my girlfriend keeps in her jewelry box. However, I must admit that if I didn’t plan on marrying her daughter someday, I’d never lend my company to so many visits. No matter how golden I make myself out to be, she sees me as tarnished, unworthy of her daughter’s hand in marriage. Sometimes, even though I know it’s wrong, I wish her mother would pass from the symptomatic chest pains to a walloping heart attack.

The clouds have shifted, and the sun sinks lower in the sky. Traffic on Interstate 57 is getting tight. Cars pass, cherry red, teal green, steel blue, black, white, silver and tan. We tail a truck the color of Mississippi mud; the license plate reads “44 MAG.” All I can think of are the words of Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry, “Make my day.”

Kate has found a classic rock station, but every ten seconds or so another station cuts in, one of those pre-programmed dance music stations. “I saw her today at the reception,” she sings. “A glass of wine in her hand.” Her lips are full but she’s no Mick Jagger. “She was practiced in the art of deception.”

I pass the Dirty Harry fan and then ease back to the right lane.

"Damnit! The Spice Girls keep cutting in," she groans. She fiddles with the knob on the radio and then joins the chorus: "You can't always get what you want. You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need." Kate reaches to the floor and picks up her small black purse. She unzips it and pulls out a pack of Marlboro red cigarettes.

I shake my head, "Can't you wait?" I ask.

The cigarette dangles from her lips and she thumbs the roller on her lavender Bic lighter. She opens the window a crack. Now we have the whistling wind. She exhales deeply, "Blame it on the Stones," she says.

"Why?"

"Every time I hear the Stones I want to smoke and drink."

I steady the wheel. "I love Keith Richards too," I say, "but that doesn't make me want to shoot heroin."

"Ooo" she says with a grimace. "I hate needles."

"What about that?" I ask and reach over to caress the tattoo on the nape of her neck - a large Chinese yin and yang symbol.

Kate taps her cigarette in the ashtray, "That's different," she says. "The needles only feel like fingers pinching."

"But you cried."

"It hurt."

"You sounded like a cat getting its tail pulled."

Kate takes another drag and teasing, she exhales in my direction. My head is engulfed by smoke and I nearly sneeze: "Thanks, doll," I tell her.

"Wish I had some red wine," she mutters.

Though it's hazardous to my driving, I like to gaze at Kate from the legs on up. Sometimes I brush her long auburn hair aside just to see her beautiful

face: the round chin, pouty lips, diminutive nose, and big brown eyes. I pat her nicely tanned thigh. "We'll be home soon," I say.

Kate closes the ashtray and rolls up the window.

I check the instruments, which I'm prone to do about every ten miles: over a half a tank of gas, temperature – fine, speed, 65 on the mark. I'm obsessed behind the wheel, she says. I drive like an old man. We saw this horrifying film in my high school drivers education class, "Death on the Highway." I can still see the officer pull the completely charred body from the front seat. Only half of the body came out, a human lump of coal. When the arm fell off, all the kids laughed except me. I'm a cautious individual. I fear accidents of any kind.

A series of slow, quiet moments pass, like when time messes around with your head – the invasion of dreamy slow motion into conscious, acute thought. Everything is hum and click and wind and thumpity thumps of road cracks. Kate is comfortable as a cat that happens upon a full clothes basket, leaps and curls up for a nap. I watch her watch the world outside – bean plants and towering cornstalks – and it makes me smile.

"Henry, you see the sun yet?" she asks.

"The sun is the sun. I've seen it lots of times."

"Yeah...but look at it," she instructs.

"Wait," I tell her. I switch lanes and pick up speed to pass a canary yellow sedan. Once back in the right lane I gaze at the sunset. "Pretty," I agree.

"It's the best," adds Kate. "A big old Florida orange in the sky. An egg yolk hanging there. And I see pinks and purples. The sun is all dressed up."

"Poetry and nicotine," I joke.

"Don't spoil it," she scolds.

I do as she wishes, I hush up. I look from the setting sun to the master stroke of light brushed across her buttermilk pale face and I know she's right. Illumination in more ways than one.

"I wish Monet had painted sunsets," says Kate.

Barely 25 miles to go and night is upon us: the time for headlights, star gazing, picking out the Big Dipper or maybe Orion's belt. We have a full moon as well. I turn to Kate. She twists the ends of her hair between her fingers and sings softly, "I want to know, have you ever seen the rain?" The full moon, that explains it all. I'm thinking of food. I pass a McDonald's road sign and I think of cheeseburgers and french fries and Coca-Cola. Too bad our current financial situation means peanut butter and jelly. It seems everyone is in a hurry to get home. The cars fly by but I'm not coaxed into speeding. Half of it is caution. The other half is darkness – it always makes me calm.

"Radar Love" comes on the radio and suddenly it's as though Kate has splashed her face with cold water. She sits up. She turns up the volume of the radio just below the distortion level and thumps her foot on the floor mat.

A motorcycle speeds by. The driver is hunched over and his chin nearly scrapes the handle bars. It is the type of bike that always frightens me. Some say aerodynamics, I say an accident waiting to happen.

"Go faster," she pleads, stomping her foot.

"I'm going 65."

"Come on James Bond, put a hoof in it!"

"Traffic's too tight. No."

She leans over and almost knocks the stick shift out of gear.

"Watch it," I say.

Kate nibbles at my ear lobe. "The wolves are playing under the full moon," she says. Her hot breath fades and she collapses into her seat. She reaches for her purse. Then there is the whistle of the wind from the cracked window; followed by the cherry red glow of her cigarette. "Henry, do you remember the time I bit you?" she asks.

I tell her yes. She refers to an early morning conversation last November. Her head lay on my chest, my fingers ran through her fine auburn hair. For a time it was endearing pillow talk. But then she posed the question, "If you were Richard Gere, would you enjoy sex symbol status? The women? The kissing? The love scenes?" "I'd love it," I replied. And then, quick as a starving child given a raspberry Zinger, she bit down hard on my left pectoral muscle. She bit down and would not let go. She left teeth marks. Then she jumped out of bed, got dressed, and grabbed my car keys. She made sure to slam the door on the way out.

"How painful, our memories," Kate teases. She puffs her cigarette and then quickly exhales a fine stream of smoke into the cracked open window. "But you can't forget that I stopped at Mister Donut on my way back. That was a nice touch," she adds.

"Sure was, I can't think of anything more romantic than jelly donuts." I speed up, signal left and then pass a brown Cadillac with a missing muffler.

"There you go!" she cheers.

For a moment, I'm Hercules.

"Now this is the final stretch, Henry! Whip that horse!" she cries. She takes a drag off her smoke, "Whip it!" shouts Kate.

I accelerate to 70 plus. I can see the block print on the back of the semi in front of me – it reads Wal-Mart. I signal left and make my move. Seventy-five miles per hour and climbing.

Her knee is relentless, like some heavy metal drummer abusing the bass drum. "Radar love!" Kate sings. I match the speed of the semi driver. She waves to the man and then makes a fist. She thrusts the fist up and down until the driver honks three times. She laughs and brushes spilt ash off her dress.

I speed up but the other driver does the same. He won't let me pass. He's playing a game. "Bastard," I mutter.

"Who won the race?" asks Kate.

Smoke tickles my nose, "What?" I ask and fight off a sneeze. I'm confused, doing my best to gain speed as an old station wagon draws closer and closer.

"Who won the race?" she repeats. She has fallen into my lap like the woozy saloon girls in western movies. I cover the stick shift with my right hand and steer with the left. "Who won the race?" she whispers, lips pressed soft against my ear.

"Hold on," I tell her and shift into fifth gear.

"Watch that hand, buddy," jokes Kate. She holds her cigarette like some torch - luckily at a safe distance from my face.

I push it to 80 plus and burn ahead of the Wal-Mart truck. Now she kneels on her seat. Her arm wraps around my neck. She takes a drag from the cigarette and fails to exhale in the right direction. My eyes burn from the smoke. Worse yet, not 20 yards away and closing is the back of the station wagon. I spot three small silhouettes in the back window – *children*, I'm sure of it.

"Get away!" I order and then shake out of her hold. Kate retreats and looks on. Losing acceleration, I dig my right foot in and speed back up to pass the Wal-Mart truck.

Then Kate jabs her fist into my leg, a sharp knuckle punch to my thigh.
“Who won the goddamn race, Henry?” she asks much louder.

“Jesus Christ!” I shout as I nearly leave the road.

“No, but he did walk on water.”

I turn to her. “Can I pass yet?” I ask.

“How should I know, I’m not driving,” she says and exhales slowly.

“Help me. Can I pass?”

“Answer me first,” Kate orders. This time there is no punch. She pauses, takes a drag off her cigarette and waits for an answer. “Give up?” she asks.

“I don’t know the game and I don’t care,” I say, utterly frustrated. Smoke drifts across the dashboard like fog over a swamp. I can see the lights of our town up and over the hill, not five miles away. The Wal-Mart truck in the right lane has sped up; once again we’re stuck in a tie. I imagine that every so often he peers down from his cab for a glimpse of cleavage, a gander at my girlfriend’s legs. Of the three silhouettes in the back of the station wagon, it appears the middle one is giving me the bird. The little snot’s finger brings the situation to a head. I get a firm grip on the wheel. *Now*, I tell myself and punch the gas.

But then Kate jabs me in the leg once more, and it is much stronger than the first blow. “Charlie did!” she cries out and starts to laugh.

I wince from the pain, my concentration cracks like so many eggs. I lose acceleration. The station wagon in front of me moves ahead. I can no longer pass the Wal-Mart truck, so I retreat to the right lane and lag behind it.

The orange glow of Kate’s cigarette invades my field of vision. “Did you see those brats?” she says, her cigarette extended over the dashboard. “Now that’s what happens when you don’t spank your kids,” she adds.

"Seems to me that you could use a good one," I say.

"A spanking, Henry? Oh, baby, please," she taunts.

"You deserve it."

"No," she says and draws the cigarette to her lips.

"Didn't your *mother* ever spank you?"

"Yes."

"Then take your punishment," I order and ready my hand, palm out, poised above her silky smooth thigh.

"No," she says and flashes a coy smile. "Don't you even."

"Take your punishment," I say. I steady the wheel with my left hand alone.

"No, and anyway, my mom used a wooden spoon. Put your hand down."

I spot the familiar 45 MPH sign and white flag my intentions.

"Children are much more fearless," I tell her as I downshift.

"And grownups are cowards," she adds. Kate eases back in her seat and puffs on what's left of her cigarette.

Smoke rolls across the dashboard, creeps under my nostrils. I sneeze twice. We have a red light less than a mile away. I put two hands on the wheel. Out of the corner of my eye I catch the play of the golden highway lights upon her buttery, bare thigh. I'm quiet, I let her believe the tension has cleared. She looks out the window at an open field with an immense box frame of steel girders. Someday there will be a grand opening.

And so I strike! My open palm dive bombs to her bare thigh but it doesn't feel as it should. Just above the knuckle of my middle finger the flesh is on fire. I scream like when in the third grade, Julie Tanner shoved me off the racing merry-go-round. Instinct draws my driving hand to the wound and

suddenly we are out of control. The car pulls sharp to the left and dips off the highway. I can see grass, deep puddles of water at the base of the ditch, but I quickly steer the car back up to the side of the road.

"I got it! I got it!" I cry and grip the wheel. I ease on the brakes. I put the car in neutral. I flex my hand and examine the burn.

Kate finds the cigarette and drops it into the ashtray. "I'm sorry, Henry," she says. "It was an accident."

"That could have been avoided," I add.

Kate watches the cars rush by. "I'm sorry," she says once more. "I thought you knew the game."

"This isn't a game, Kate."

"No, I mean that Charlie business back there. It's a kid's game."

"We're not kids anymore."

"I know, I know."

"Are you hurt?"

"My neck hurts."

I reach over with my good hand and massage her neck.

"Mmm...How about you?" she asks.

"My heart is racing," I say. "And this burn really stings."

"Let me see," says Kate and inspects the burn. "I think Charlie's run his last race," she says.

"Yeah, good idea. I think it's going to scar," I say.

"Yes, it's going to be there forever." Kate encircles the wound clockwise with the tip of her forefinger, careful not to touch. "Forever," she whispers.

"Forever," I must agree. I wait until it's safe to join the traffic again. I put the car in first gear and head for home.

Quick Change

Mother raises the margarita to her lips and brings a smile to my face. It looks terribly funny, her tiny fingers – all eight, and thumbs too – wrapped around the jumbo-sized glass for proper balance. As the tangy cocktail glides across her tongue, she makes a bitter face. Autumn, my wife, not known for her tact, erupts with laughter. Mom blushes and sets down the drink. “Did you tell the bartender it was my birthday?,” she jokes.

We are celebrating her birthday at Chi-Chi’s, off of Veterans Parkway. Then the three of us will head off to the movies, a romantic comedy called *Under the Umbrella*. It stars Tom Hanks and Ann Heche...Mother says that Meg Ryan was pregnant at the time and unavailable to cast.

Today is a personal victory, the first time I have truly shelled out a fair amount on her birthday. Normally I send a half dozen roses from Jean’s Flower Shop – at half price because Autumn’s sister works there. But things aren’t so tight these days, these days are elastic as the top of my boxer shorts. Goodbye, desperation!

“Jake, Jake,” says Autumn.

I am gazing out the big window at our booth, catching the play of the bright July sun as it dances upon speeding cars on the parkway. I look out of windows more than most people, I believe. It is something carried over from childhood. My father left when I was three. Mother booted him out because he quit AA and kept on drinking. She claims she couldn’t stand the way he’d rock back and forth (clearly drunk) with me in his arms. Some Saturdays he’d show – but never on time – and others he’d call with an excuse. He was a locksmith. I can still recall the sound of his van as it turned down our street, the engine would roar and the wheels squeaked. Whenever I asked about him, Mom would say, “He’s either opening doors or opening bottles.” But I always

believed he would show, and so I spent many Saturday afternoons peering through the silky curtains of the big picture window...waiting, and waiting.

"Jacob, how do you like the factory?" asks mother.

Kal-Kan. The monotony of assembly lines. The unmistakable odor of dog food. White company uniforms. Walk outside the yellow lines and you may get mashed by a forklift. One more week and I cross the 90-day probation plateau. Full benefits. Roses and a new sun dress for my wife. An extra supply of Huggies for the kid. A VCR that actually works. No more Pabst Blue Ribbon or Gallo wines. I sit up straight and grimace. "I love it, Mom," I say. "I really love it." I take a hearty drink of my Corona beer and swing an arm around Autumn.

"Shit," says Mom.

"What's wrong?" asks Autumn.

"I forgot to tell Wanda I can't play tonight."

"Cards?"

"Yeah, Rummy."

"How is Wanda?" I ask.

"Well, she can down the Bacardi and Coke just fine...As far as Rummy, I've beat her three months straight," says Mom.

"Autumn, your hair is in the salsa," I say.

"It is not."

"Well," I say and then brush the long, thin auburn strands over her shoulder, "it almost was."

"Thanks," she says and pops a tortilla chip into her mouth. "I'd like some guacamole," Autumn tells us.

Mother sighs and shakes her head. "I wish they had steak here."

"You could have steak fajitas, Mom," says Autumn.

“Where are they?” she asks.

“Right here,” says Autumn and shows her the place.

Steak... My mind wanders a few years back. Autumn and I were struggling to get by; I relied upon the confidence game and imagination. It was Sunday, and Autumn had just got over the flu bug. I took her to Ponderosa; we ordered huge T-bone steaks, medium rare, and then lounged with our Coca-Colas in hand.

I remember the steaks were so heavy the waitress, this short, frumpy thing with braces on her teeth, nearly dropped them. We took a few bites – the steak was done to perfection. But then I told Autumn to stop eating. I told her to close her eyes. I dug into my pocket and retrieved an old pharmacy bottle – an antibiotic from when I had bronchitis so terrible it gave me a fever. Then I unleashed the contents atop both steaks. The mealworms, as good as steak to the American chameleon and Green iguana, squirmed like mad. I covered them with A-1 sauce.

When Autumn opened her eyes and looked at her plate she lost it completely. Not exactly screaming, but damned good enough to get the attention of our waitress. Our frumpy little server’s mouth fell agape in horror. Within minutes, we had brand new steaks. The dinner was free and the manager even gave us a bunch of coupons. He wanted to shut us up good.

“...I don’t know,” says Mom and sips her margarita. “I’ve never liked small dogs. Small dogs yip and yip and yip. They are nervous all the time. And they don’t do a bit of good if an intruder breaks in. A little dog is always underfoot,” she adds.

“What’s this?” I ask.

"Muddy is chewing everything," says mother. Muddy is a chocolate labrador puppy, maybe three months old. "Everything except his bones," she adds.

"She wants to give us that coffee table," says Autumn, a gleeful smile spread across her face.

"And why?" I ask.

"Muddy has gnawed a corner all to hell," says mother. "It's a terrible eyesore in the den. No use to me."

The waitress comes to our table and asks, "What would y'all like today?" She is quite tall and very shapely, with an unreal glow to her long, blonde hair. I feel she has used a bit too much blush, and the lipstick is way too red.

"You a Texan girl?" asks mother.

"Sure am," says the waitress. "Born and raised in San Antonio."

"So why are you here?"

"It's a long, long story," says the waitress as she readies her pen.

"Oh we've no time for that, miss," says mother. "We're starving."

I feel better than ever before. It's a crime to feel this good. To see my mother smile and carry on is a blessing. I know things could be different. I know if things had gone the other way last September I'd feel guilty every time I saw her face.

Mom's house was only a few blocks away, and what I wanted would only take two arms to hold. I stood outside the house, took a few deep breaths and shook my head at the sight of the gray aluminum siding. I still wasn't used to it; growing up the house was sky blue and pure wood.

I paced up the driveway and at the garage door I turned around. I looked to the right and then the left. The street was empty and quiet. All that

rose above the still September air was the chirp of the crickets in the bushes out front.

Remembering all the times I rode my Huffy Thunder Road bicycle up the drive, the fat tire often smacking against the garage door, I made for the handle and tried to turn it. But the handle wouldn't budge, and if not for the discreet nature of the visit I would have laughed out loud at my foolishness. The garage door was under electric operation now, the kind with a black box and a code. The box was off to my right. The code was 1, 23, 45 – mom couldn't think of anything better. I told her not to worry; who would think of anything more plain and stupid.

I scurried into the dim yellow light of the open garage and quickly pressed a button to close it again. I turned the doorknob to the den and stood in the dark. I caught my breath. I removed the flashlight from the inner pocket of my faded Levi's jacket and swung the tiny spotlight from the tan shag carpet to the basement door, and then across a wall of pictures to the open Venetian blinds. I walked around the oak coffee table – almost knocking over a vase of plastic wildflowers – and knelt on the small, cream-colored love seat. I closed both sets of blinds and navigated around the coffee table. I shined the flashlight into the laundry room and illuminated a baby blue hamper full of clothes.

Suddenly there was a tremendous thud from the bedroom above me. I looked up at the yellowy, cigarette-smoke-stained tiles and mumbled, "Buck, my friend, you sure are getting fat." The old, obese Alaskan malamute barked once and then roamed down the hallway. The stairs took him a while and that made me sad; at the bottom he barked once again.

Anticipating Buck, I reached into the pocket of my faded Levi's jacket and pulled out a large dog biscuit. Buck paused at the stairs that led down to

the laundry room, bathroom and the den. He whimpered. Mom called it arthritis. “Come on, Buck,” I begged. I had to repeat it three times before the huge beast sat at my feet.

I knelt down and set the flashlight beside me. A stream of light fell across the floor in the direction of grandfather’s easy chair, a very old model the color of wet sand. I reached for Buck, and his coat had grown thick and rough. His tail flopped like a dying fish – no more wag. I ran my fingers through the fur on his throat and he slopped a few kisses on me. I grimaced and wiped off my mouth. “Here you go, boy,” I told him and gave up the dog biscuit.

Flashlight in hand, I bounded up the stairs to the kitchen. The glowing blue display on the microwave read 7:17. I thought about Autumn and my mother – how they were also in the dark, the dark of the movie theatre. I wished I could trade positions. I’d like to be the one in a darkened movie theatre munching on buttery popcorn. “Let there be light!” I called to Buck and flipped the switch for the overhead light down there in the den.

I hunched over grandfather’s tan easy chair and braced my arms around it – something like a bear hug. I moved it from the corner and plopped myself down. I pulled on the handle of the easy chair and the leg rest kicked out – it squeaked so bad from age that Buck pricked up his ears. “It’s all right, boy,” I said. The dog came to me and I ran my hand across his furry hide as I caught my breath.

I thought about why I was here. My fingers ran through Buck’s hide and I thought about what this was all about. I looked back to remember the moment I decided to rob my mother.

The night I decided to lift grandfather’s coin collection I was drunk. I hadn’t done very well in pool league play. I stumbled into the house and struggled to turn on the lamp. I approached the bedroom door and turned the

knob. However, Autumn had shoved something heavy in front of it. I pounded on the door and called her name. Autumn was pissed off, I hadn't yet agreed to her plan, to steal the coin collection and sell it to the pawn shop down the street. Instead, I had gone off to play pool. I kept losing, mostly on the eight ball, and I kept on drinking.

I knocked and knocked; our baby daughter, Audrey, was the only one to answer - from a crib inside, she wailed away. When I finally pushed my way into the room, there was Autumn at the foot of the bed, and tiny, whimpering Audrey rocking away in her mother's arms. It was so touching it reminded me of a sculpture of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus at Epiphany Catholic Church. I was confirmed there, and Autumn and I went about once a month. I never stole anything from the gift basket, but I often thought about it.

Weary and soused, I collapsed into the cranberry colored armchair that Autumn had blocked the door with. The armchair was a street curb throwaway – the rocking variety - and took a great deal of Duct tape to clear of cat hair. I rocked along as I watched my baby girl sway in her mother's arms. And Autumn whispered to me, "It's not a robbery, it's just a little quick change."

My fingers brushed through Buck's coat one last time and then my hand fell limp against his side. But luckily I didn't fall asleep. Buck – like most dogs both small and large – craved attention. So when the petting stopped, Buck worked himself free of my dangling arm, got down on his belly, and licked my fingertips – begging for more. I promptly came to and sprang to my feet.

Flashlight in hand, I stretched and made a large V shape with my arms. I yawned loudly and Buck, a bit startled by the unfamiliar sound, whimpered. "It's OK boy," I told him and patted his head.

I walked to the empty corner of the room and got down on my hands and knees; the carpet under grandfather's easy chair was covered by years of

dust. Even though mother had always kept the house clean, I knew she wouldn't dare move her father's chair. For mother is superstitious: to upset a dead loved one's former surroundings will bring bad karma. She also believes in reincarnation, particularly that we are reborn as animals. I joked once that perhaps grandfather, an Irishman, had come back as the neighbor's Irish Setter, Murphy. Mother scolded me and said if I wasn't careful I might come back as a mole – small, blind and destined to do nothing all day but dig around in the yard for worms.

I crawled right up to the lower wall and shined the flashlight on the thin particle board. It was filled with 116 pencil eraser-sized holes. I counted them all when I was a kid. On the right side of the board, about half way up and large enough to fit a finger in was another hole. I stuck my forefinger in the hole and slid the panel all the way to the left. A damp, musty smell escaped from the darkness within the crawl space. Buck came forward on his belly. I could hear his heavy tail flop back and forth on the carpet. I turned and said, "Time for us pirates to get our treasure."

I have never liked the dark. As a child, I required a night light on both sides of the bed and in the hallway that led to the bathroom. These days, Autumn allows me a single night light on my side of the bed.

Darkness wasn't my greatest childhood fear – fear of a heart attack was. It was the oddest thing. I'd fall fast asleep like all kids do, but then a few hours later I'd wake in such a panic that I'd leave my bed and wander. I'd pace about the house with my heart in high gear and pray to God for it to slow down. Sometimes I'd travel in a clockwise circle: living room to kitchen, kitchen to dining room, dining room to living room and so on. Other times, I'd walk up and down the basement stairs until I was so weak I had to sit down. Mother,

who quite a few mornings found me curled up in my blue afghan on the living room sofa or lying on the floor of the den with the TV on, thought I was a sleepwalker. She took me to a shrink but he said I was fine.

I would eventually grow out of pacing in the night; and I also learned to leave my heart alone. Sometimes Autumn rests her head on my chest and chatters along with my heartbeat. She says it's like the tick-tock of a clock and it helps her get to sleep. But I leave it alone because some things are better off that way.

Yet, I'll always remember the panic stricken, heart racing night I trod down the stairs from the kitchen to the den, opened the basement door and saw the light on in the furnace room. My grandfather used the garage to build cabinets and bookshelves, a bureau and an oak coffee table. He used the furnace room to work on smaller items: bar stools for the kitchen, a birdhouse for the back yard, even the wooden car I raced in the soap box derby in Cub Scouts. However, on that night, as I crept down the basement stairs, my heart beating fierce and steady as Indian drums at a pow-wow, I didn't smell sawdust or stain, nor did I hear the scratch of sandpaper. Grandpa was working on something else.

I sat on the fifth step up from the bottom and listened closely. His transistor radio, black, with an antenna I liked to pull all the way up, played music without words. I remember the music always made me feel like it was spring. I'd close my eyes and think about spring. I'd see buds burst forth on the trees; I'd see the grass grow tall and green; I'd see dandelions and tulips. I'd watch seeds scatter to the earth in the garden, and grandpa would fall to his knees, cover them up and pat the earth flat. He'd get up again, he'd fall again. It was like a dance. There was the song of the robins and cardinals. And there was the whistle of the wind in gusts as it blew through the trees and the lilac

bushes. The clouds never rolled so swift and wonderful. The music of grandpa's transistor radio was full of life and color and always reminded me of spring. Grandpa called it jazz.

From the fifth step from the bottom I sat and listened to the music. I closed my eyes, thought about spring and told God that if he'd slow my heart down I'd start eating broccoli. I took deep breaths because mother had told me to. In, out, in, out, in, out.

Suddenly, above the bouncing jazz there was the sound of falling coins. I wondered if grandpa had a piggy bank too, and so I rose to my feet, hugged the wall and stepped down to the cold basement tile. The coins kept falling, and with each clink and clank I grew more eager to spy.

I took a deep breath and peered around the corner. The hanging light bulb made a glowing spot on the back of grandpa's bald head. He sat upon a high bar stool in a white T-shirt and gray sweat pants. He wore navy blue slippers. On the work bench before him was a shiny black box. When the last coin fell into place, grandpa closed the black box and locked it with a small key. He raised a tumbler of whiskey to his lips and took a drink. A new song played on the radio and he was so happy he began to drum his fingers on top of the box.

After that I tip-toed upstairs and hid behind the hamper in the laundry room. Soon I heard grandpa on the basement stairs. I watched him enter the den and wobble a bit. He turned on the standing lamp and set the shiny black box on the cream colored love seat to his right. Then he tugged at his easy chair until it was clear of the corner. He opened the crawlspace and put the black box inside. He moved the chair back, and then steadied himself on an arm as he caught his breath. He came my way to use the bathroom, but I fluffed a pink comforter up and over my head.

The next morning mother found me in grandfather's chair. I had the thing leaned all the way back and the pink comforter up over my eyes. I'd left the standing lamp on. She didn't ask me a thing. She removed the comforter and said, "I have to wash this, Jacob. Now go get some Lucky Charms."

"This better be worth it," I mumbled, my head and neck pressed tight to the ceiling of the crawlspace. I coughed from the dust I'd turned up, and shining the flashlight about I grimaced at the sight of cobwebs. I hate spiders, I even call on Autumn to kill them. She gets a kick out of spraying household cleaners on their tiny bodies – slow death by Formula 409, Lysol, Fantastik, Pledge, Windex and Dow (with the scrubbing bubbles).

I hovered over the largest cardboard box, opened it slow, and peering at the contents, I shook my head. This was far too easy. The shiny black lock box had been set on some old magazines. I removed the coin collection, and holding the flashlight over the box, I looked through the stack of magazines. They began with *Popular Mechanics*, followed by old issues of *Sports Illustrated*, and ended with – nice call grandpa – *Playboy*. I thought about taking those because the pictorials were from a different era, the pictures much less doctored, a tad bit more classy. The articles weren't bad either. But then I thought about what had happened to my last *Playboy* collection. Autumn deliberately moved them from under my T-shirts in the dresser drawer to a box of Christmas sweaters that I refused to wear. And that box of sweaters ended up at the Salvation Army.

I spied something bright red that was wedged snugly between the stack of magazines and the side of the box, and I yanked it free. It was my grandfather's Saint Louis Cardinals ball cap, and on the inside, carefully wound up, was the old ear-piece he liked to use when he watched the games. At

sundown I would put my bicycle in the garage and shoot through the door because I was hungry for dinner. More than once I ripped the ear piece out of the TV on my race to the kitchen. That's when I first heard somebody shout, "Son of a bitch!" I decided to take the ball cap. I wished my grandfather was around to see Mark McGuire break the single season home run record.

I started to back out of the crawlspace, but I hit my head and dropped the flashlight. It rolled away from me, I cursed, and then I stretched for it. I got hold of it but then I paused.

The beam of the flashlight illuminated a small wooden treasure chest in the corner; it looked like something out of *Treasure Island* only ten times smaller. I pushed the box aside, crawled forward and retrieved the small treasure chest. In doing so, I caught a cobweb just under the nose and sneezed. I shined the flashlight at an angle and noticed the chest wasn't equipped with a lock - two rusty hasps, like those on a storage trunk, were all that kept it closed. I undid the hasps, they were tight and gave a nasty squeak. I counted to three and then I opened my eyes. The inside was lined in thin burgundy velvet, and two tumblers fit snug in matching sockets. A bottle lay sideways and I knew by the black labeling the brand of whiskey - Jack Daniel's. I associate four odors with my grandfather: sawdust, Old Spice aftershave, cigarette smoke, and Jack Daniel's whiskey. I closed the lid of the "collector's item," snapped the rusty hasps closed, and removed it from the crawlspace.

I carried the heavy lock box to the kitchen and set it on the counter near the black and white TV. I flipped the light switch and the familiar whir of the ceiling fan began. I checked the glowing green microwave clock - it read 8:23. The movie would let out shortly after nine. I told Autumn to drive slowly, which is hard for her because she lacks patience and digs caffeine. She's had five speeding tickets to my one.

I bolted back down the stairs and placed grandfather's easy chair in the corner. I pulled the St. Louis Cardinals ball cap on tight, and grabbed the treasure chest of Jack Daniel's.

With the items in hand, I headed for the front door. I nearly dropped them when I saw the door knob moving.

"Jacob McNally!" exclaimed Miss Wanda Glover.

"Nearly gave me a heart attack," I said. In Wanda's left hand was a pie – from the slits in the top it looked like cherry – and in the other was a walkie-talkie.

"Got a pie for your Mom," she said. "And this gizmo is for our neighborhood watch program. Just last week they got Carol Duffy's TV and VCR." Miss Glover looked me up and down. "So what are you doing here, Jake? Shouldn't you be with the baby?" she said.

"Audrey's with her Mom," I said. I shifted the weight of the heavy items to my left foot and added, "I fixed the toilet."

"Funny looking tool chest," said Wanda Glover.

"I know, but this is just a makeshift tool chest."

"I understand. Someday you'll have the real thing."

"Someday," I agreed.

Wanda Glover moved into the gray house on the corner the summer I turned eleven. As a housewarming gift, my mother made an angel food cake. It was a hot day and I couldn't find any sugar for my lime Kool-Aid. So I hopped on my Nash skateboard with the red wheels and rolled down the street to get my mother. I met Wanda's son, David, half the way there – his skateboard was wider, black with white wheels. We became instant friends. And Wanda, a brand new divorcee, clung to my mother like a sheet of fabric

softener to warm clothes. They go to the movies, they shop together, and every Friday night they play Rummy and drink Bacardi and Coke.

My once racing heart slowed to a waltz beat, and I realized how closely Ms. Glover resembled Willie Nelson. Her pearl colored cowboy boots were scuffed. She wore the familiar, faded blue jeans - and even with the narrow black belt they sagged on her hips. A navy sweatshirt with a design of timber wolves encircling the fabric adorned her grand, gravity-weary bust; around her neck was a chain of turquoise beads. She stood there and flashed a wide grin at me, and I could tell by her yellowy teeth that she hadn't given up smoking...nor drinking about a pot of coffee a day. Her skin was bronzed from working on her yard, and her smile revealed deep wrinkles like interstate markings on a highway map. Her long and graying auburn hair was tied in a pony tail that came to rest in the middle of her back. I nearly asked her to croon Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again."

Wanda strolled to the kitchen and placed the pie on the counter. Buck ambled down the stairs and went into the kitchen. "Sorry boy," said Wanda, "I don't have any beef jerky tonight." She opened a cupboard. "Come here, Jake," she ordered.

"What?" I asked and shifted the weight of the coin collection to my right foot.

"I'd like to talk to you," she said. I heard ice fall into glasses. Then she opened a can of soda.

I walked into the kitchen and said, "I really have to go, Miss Glover."

Wanda held out an ice cold glass of Coca-Cola, flashed her yellow teeth with a smile, and said, "Here you go."

I had no choice but to lend Wanda an ear. I set my things on the kitchen counter, careful not to squash the pie, and took the glass of Coke. I sat on the wooden stool, took a drink, and hoped for a short, sweet conversation.

Wanda tossed the empty cans into the garbage beneath the sink and joined me. She took a drink. Buck came over and sat before Wanda. He locked his icy blue eyes on her and wagged his tail.

"I told you Buck," said Wanda, "I don't have any beef jerky."

"Lay down, Buck," I ordered. Buck didn't move a muscle. "Lay down," I said.

"Down!" shouted Wanda. Buck stretched out flat. Wanda cackled. "Gotta say it like you mean it," she said.

"With authority," I added. I took a drink. "Ahh, good stuff. Well, I really should be going," I said like I meant it.

"So, how is the baby?"

"She's fine."

"What's she weigh?"

"I don't keep track."

"They grow so fast...How is your wife?"

"Fine, she's really great."

"I sure wish David would meet someone."

Wanda's son, David, was my best friend. He had the strength and confidence of Muhammad Ali and the cagey eyes of Clint Eastwood. He made a great co-conspirator. I remember how on our first robbery, an empty fraternity house, it was David's idea to rob the liquor cabinet. It was during spring break. Many students left for Daytona, Panama City, Fort Lauderdale, Cancun...but hard-luck kids like David and me – the less fortunate, financially challenged, minimum-wage working dysfunctional misfits – were left behind.

So we put our time in at Burger King, skated the empty college campus, saw a lot of movies and robbed our first house. We gave their Greek letter sweatshirts to the Salvation Army. The liquor lasted the whole month of April.

“How is David?” I finally asked. He had been sent to Vienna, Illinois, to what is referred to as “boot camp.” He was caught lifting a bottle of Robitussin cough syrup from Walgreens. Worse yet, he had a one-hitter in his pocket and a small amount of weed. And though they made it easy – a fine, a class once a week, probation – David couldn’t quit. He flunked a piss test and was sent down state shortly after Christmas. Talk about a Happy New Year.

“He’s a changed man,” said Wanda. She smiled and sipped her drink.

“Really?”

“He’s a winner, Jake,” she added and took a drink. “A real winner.”

David was a true competitor, he couldn’t stand to be outdone at anything. I’d steal a Mars bar, he’d steal a pack of *ten* Hershey bars. I’d take five dollars from the cash drawer at Burger King, and he’d steal ten dollars, loose change, and a Whopper with cheese. I’d lift a couple of CDs from somebody’s home, and David would take the stereo to play it on. A couple years ago, I bought my mother *Sleepless in Seattle* on videotape for Christmas. David’s mother didn’t have a VCR and so David stole one for her – a 4 Head, Hi-Fi VCR no less.

David was a born risk taker...I was always the one too afraid to raise my arms up on the roller coaster. So naturally, given the odds, David’s luck ran out before mine. A guy he scored pot from, Ray, coaxed him into dealing drugs very small time. “Only to your friends,” he advised. I never liked pot much, it either made me real sleepy, real hungry or real paranoid. I couldn’t stand pulling jobs with David when he was stoned because he’d move like a sloth and laugh like a hyena. He stopped skateboarding, which to me is the

equivalent of a Catholic quitting church. And he never left the house before three in the afternoon – and then only after a Mountain Dew, a bowl of Rice Krispies and a nicely packed bowl of dope. I overheard deals go down. I met complete strangers. I could barely talk to David because I couldn't stand the way his drugged up body swayed to and fro.

So I did my own drifting away, right into the arms of Autumn. On Valentine's Day we became engaged; it was in a cozy room at the Jumer's Chateau. We drank red wine and ate onion rings. She washed the grease from her hands, dried them, packed the hotel towel in her backpack, and then I gave her the ring. (I wanted to steal her something nice but she made me promise to pay for it on my own.) We ordered up a naughty movie and mimicked the actors. We laughed too hard and nature took over. She rolled over on her stomach, and then beckoned from her hands and knees. I entered her slowly, but before long I was racing in and out with the reckless abandon of any furry, four-legged animal. Autumn's palms pressed hard against the fancy walnut headboard. We made sounds, terribly loud and strange sounds, but crazy from pleasure we couldn't manage words. As I neared orgasm, the condom broke. But I was too far out of my head to notice. Nine months later, Audrey was born.

The last robbery David and I did together was the upstairs apartment of a girl he'd met in a bar. Her name was Mary and she studied psychology. Her father was a lawyer and her mother was a doctor. David said she was pretty, but a real nut case. He laughed, told me the night he met her they did shots of liquor called Mind Erasers and popped valium. I remember taking a book off the shelf – something on the work of Carl Jung. I flipped through it with my rubber gloved fingers – yet another benefit of Burger King. David was in the bathroom and making quite a racket. I told him to keep it down and hurry up.

He turned off the sink and stumbled out. I closed the book and held it under my arm. He looked different, horrible – like he'd made himself up for Halloween. He was pale, red eyed, and so thin his clothes didn't fit right. He came out of the bathroom and sneezed. He held two Ziploc bags full of pharmaceuticals, wiped his nose with the sleeve of his navy sweatshirt and cracked a smile. But the smile no longer belonged to David.

"He kick the drugs?" I asked Wanda.

"I think so. He only sniffles when he has a cold." Wanda took a drink. "Still, I like to get close when I talk to him...you know, look into his eyes."

"Dead giveaway."

Wanda snickered, then added, "And I still search his pockets, his room."

"Nothing, huh?"

"Just sticks of gum. Dirty magazines under the bed." Wanda laughed.

I joined in the laughter, finished my drink and munched on the ice. For moments there were no more words. The conversation had bottomed out. I rubbed my eyes and listened to the whir of the ceiling fan, the hum of the refrigerator, and the hoot of an owl from somewhere out back.

"He misses you, Jake."

I opened my eyes.

"He's still very sorry."

"Things happen."

"I hear shame in his voice," she said. I thought I saw her eyes well up.

"It takes time to get strong when you've been so weak," I preached. I only wanted to keep her from crying.

"And it's so hard for him to meet new people. You know, *good* people – like you," she said and patted me on the back.

"Oh," I said, "I'm no saint, Ms. Glover."

“Well, nobody is, I suppose. But you’re honest and decent. You have a lovely wife and a beautiful baby girl. David looks up to you.”

I did my best to appear flattered, and I clenched my teeth to stop the explosive laughter just dying to get out. When I was ready, I said, “Tell him I’ll see him.”

“He stopped by the Marathon station just the other night.”

“I don’t work there any more.”

“I know.”

“Third shift – it gets real creepy. Autumn never liked that. I didn’t want to become the next gas jockey shot for fifty bucks and a couple cartons of cigarettes.” Actually, I was fired for stealing Jack Link beef jerky and cans of Lipton ice tea. Mr. Johnson liked to watch the videotapes; he thought he was the coach of the Notre Dame football team or something.

“Terrible things happening these days,” said Wanda with a shake of her head. She cleared her throat. “I’ll bet David could get you a job,” she said.

“Really? Where?”

“Kal-Kan.”

“The dog food factory?”

“Yes, David’s uncle has been there for years.”

“I heard it smells real bad in there.”

“David got used to it.”

“Hmm.”

Wanda chuckled. “You don’t smell a thing for ten dollars an hour plus benefits.”

I raised my glass. “To David,” I said.

“To David,” said Wanda.

Our glasses touched and the sound was magical.

Wanda was beaming. I didn't really mind her ugly yellow teeth. I was glad to see her happy. Wanda stood up.

"Miss Glover."

"Yes."

"I was never here...I want my handiwork to be a surprise."

"You're such a good son," she said. The hug that followed nearly knocked me off my stool.

On the drive home I thought about David. The last time I'd seen him was two years ago. Audrey had just been born and we were visiting my mother. Later, after mother fawned over the baby and made us all nauseous, Autumn and I took the baby down to the Glover's.

David looked good. In Vienna he'd quit smoking and taken up exercise. "Not so much for health," he said in a letter, "but to pass the time." His dark hair was short, like a soldier's. He had an even tan from helping his Mom with the yard. He was shirtless and sweaty but I gave him a hug anyway. When I pulled free, I noticed he'd got his smile back.

We let David hold the baby but she got scared right away from his dark beard and mustache. Autumn took the child into the kitchen, where Ms. Glover was baking a peach pie.

David sat down on the long, pumpkin colored sofa. He rubbed his hands together. "Can you believe it," he chuckled.

I sat down next to him and said, "Hey, the important thing is, you're back." I noticed the house arrest anklet and added, "You'll get that black box off sooner than you think."

He chuckled some more. "No, Jake, do you hear that," he said.

"Hear what?"

“This should help,” he said. He hit a button on a small remote control on the glass-topped coffee table, and classical music rose above the voices in the kitchen. “It’s Mozart,” he said. He waved his arms like a conductor. “From Metallica to Mozart!” he cried. “Can you believe it?” he said.

I nodded in approval. “Sweet,” I said.

He waved his arms some more. “My counselor down there said it would help to keep me calm. I wrote letters to Mom listening to this. I thought about writing you, but I guess you were pretty mad,” said David as his conducting ceased.

“I got over it.”

“I’ll get myself together,” he said and put his feet up on the table.

“One day at a time,” I said. But the words were forced. I had doubts.

“Damn straight, brother,” David agreed. He folded his hands in his lap and said, “I just love all the changes in this music. Listen up, Jake,” he ordered and gave my earlobe a playful tug, “Here comes a change.”

“A movement.”

“I call it change.”

The three of us are stuffed. We slouch in the booth at Chi-Chi’s and breathe slow and deep. The music of Mexico hails down from the speakers above but the only word I can make out is *amor* – love. I lift my shirt and make circles on my protruding, hairy belly but Audrey tells me to stop. “Not in public,” she scolds.

Mother reaches across the table and takes the straw from my Coca-Cola. She slurps down the rest of her watery margarita. “I can’t recall a better birthday,” she says.

Audrey squeezes my hand under the table. I turn and give her a smile.

"How about dessert, Mom?" I ask.

"No, no, no. Not for me."

"Sure?"

"Now Jacob, do you really want me to get so fat that the only thing left to do is go on the *Oprah* show?" she jokes.

Somewhere a baby starts to cry.

"I want to call my Mom and make sure that Audrey's OK," says Autumn.

I stand up to let her free. I grab the check. Mother begins to rummage through her purse.

When I return they stand waiting by the table, embroiled in conversation.

"I wouldn't say that Tom Hanks is hot," says Autumn.

"Oh, he's adorable."

"But he's no Harrison Ford."

"I don't like his nose."

"All I'm saying is that Tom Hanks is *cute*. He's not hot. Can you see Tom Hanks playing Indiana Jones." Autumn laughs at herself.

"Let's go to the movies," I say.

Autumn takes mother by the arm. I watch them pass.

"What kind of a title is *Under the Umbrella*?" I hear mother say.

"I don't know, Mom," says Autumn. "But rain is so romantic."

I look down at the table to find a tip of two dollars and loose change. Mother left every last penny from the bottom of her purse. An old familiar feeling swoops down from my attic like a dirty old bat in a cave. I used to snag tips easy as the wind. In my long, dark trench coat with the too-long sleeves I'd

stroll by and snatch the cash with two fingers. There are a million ways to make a little extra change. I've only known the wrong ways.

I'm not sure if it was Miss Glover, Catholic guilt, or David's love of Mozart that did it for me. But I didn't steal the coin collection. I caught hell from Autumn but David came through for me. Everything is running smooth now, like a skateboard on new pavement. "Memories," I whisper to Abe Lincoln on the five dollar bill in my hand. Good old honest Abe. I release it and watch it fall like a feather to join the rest of the tip.

A bus boy crashes a half full tub in the spot where Mom sat. Frightened, my heart races. The kid is tall and thin. His blonde hair is spiked and full of styling mousse. A gold hoop hangs from his right ear. A gold chain adorns his neck. I don't like his eyes. They are a too-trusting blue and nothing but narrow slits. He starts with the glasses.

"Make sure she gets that," I say in reference to the tip.

The kid goes about his work.

"Hey, did you hear me?" I beckon.

"Yes," he says and stacks the dirty plates.

"She's the one from Texas. The one with the long story."

As he wipes the table he mutters, "Every story is a *long* story."

"But if you really listen, they move so quick."

The kid lifts the bus tub. He carelessly bumps into me.

"They can change your life," I say.

The kid walks away shaking his head, my words still ringing in his ears.